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WESTERN STORY

MAGAZINE • JAN. 27, 1940

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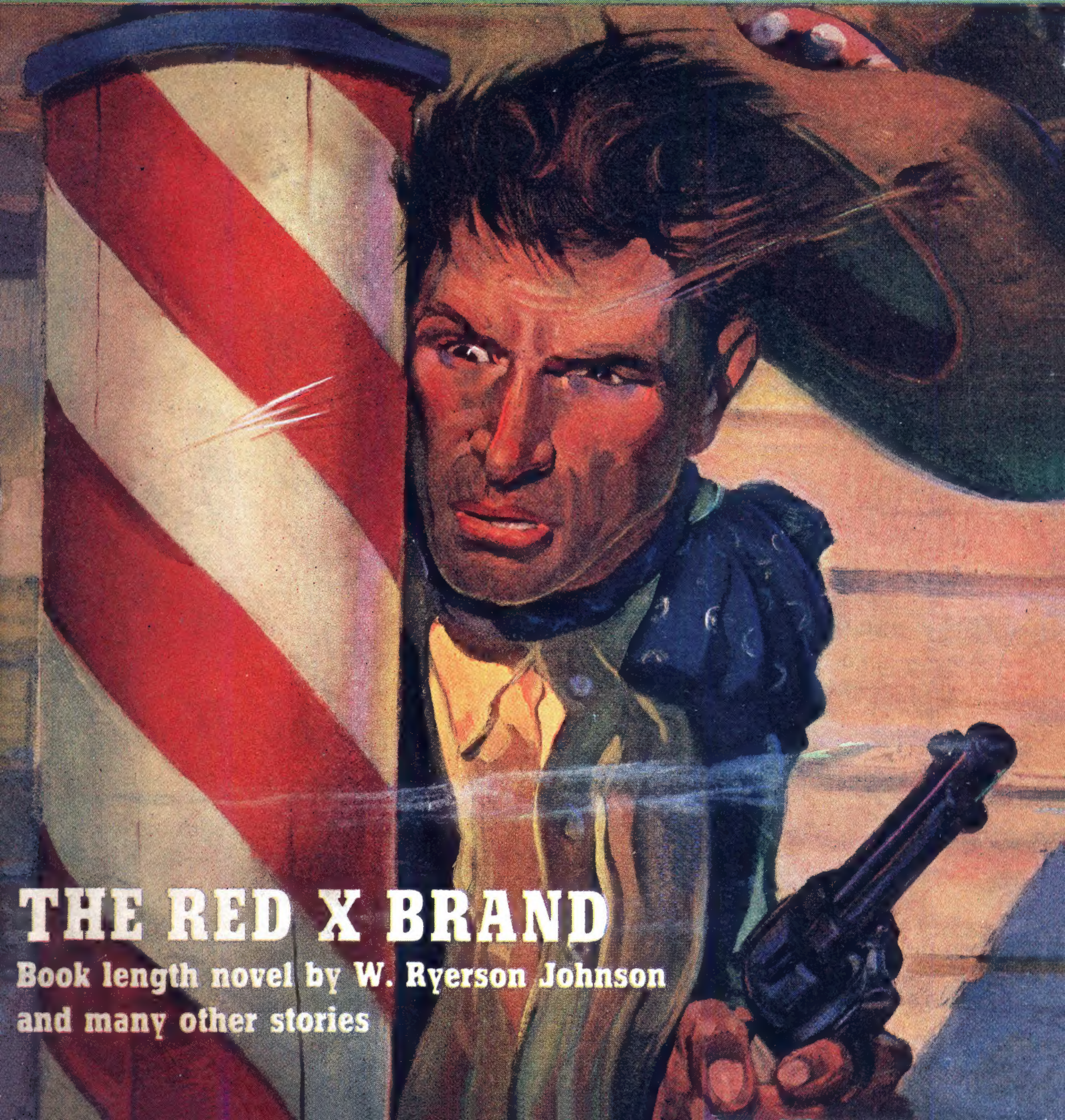

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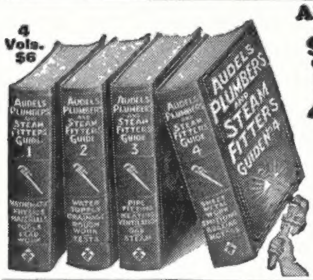

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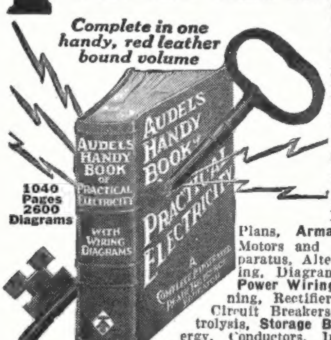

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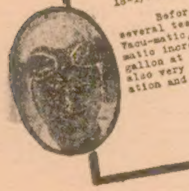

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STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

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CONTENTS FOR JANUARY 27, 1940 VOL. CLXXIX NO. 6

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COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

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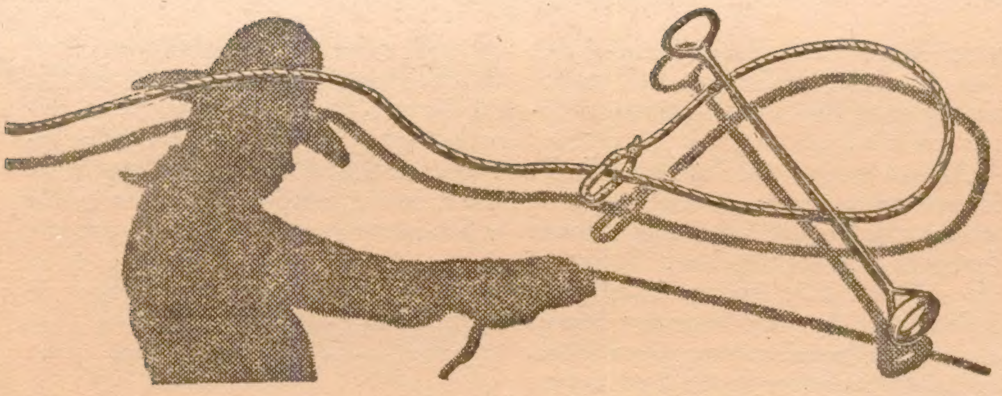

The Roundup

We've often thought it must be mighty fine to be a man of property, but it evidently has its disadvantages at times, for L. L. Foreman tells us of his sad predicament in the following note from Florida:

"News has just reached me from New Mexico that I have bought there (1) a grand piano; (2) a hand-wrought fireplace set, very fancy; (3) a copper sundial; (4) a large silver tray; (5) a stuffed Indian. These items were part of the furnishings of a very swell rancho that was going under the hammer at the time I was there. I bid in on them, in a dazed moment, absently forgetting that I had no house to put them in. My bid, it seems, has been accepted, along with my check, and what disposition do I wish to make of the items which I now pridefully own at long distance?

"This, along with the problem of the parrot feathers, will keep at least part of my mind occupied during the coming winter. If, while you are studying in spare moments the matter of the parrot feathers, you happen to hit upon a solution for this latest interstate entanglement of mine, I'll be your loyal subject forever if you'll send it along to me.

"The intriguing part of it is, the grand piano and other items are way up in the mountains; must have cost a pretty to have them hauled up there; would cost another pretty to have them hauled down again. So there they are. And here am I. A matter of two thousand miles separates us. I've simply got to get back there and build that house of mine, if only for the sake of the stuffed Indian.

"Lo, the poor Indian—he's homeless for a fact now, until I get that house built, so I can perch him up over the front door, where he'll earn his keep by scaring away visiting hunters and fishermen while I'm working."

As for a solution to L. L.'s problem, we're afraid we're unable to be of any great help. We're always willing to side a friend, but we wouldn't know what to do with a grand piano if we had one. We have a fireplace set (not fancy), our dollar silver turnip is the only way we have of reckoning time, and we never owned a silver tray or a stuffed Indian! So, all in all, we're sort of on unfamiliar ground. But of all the above-mentioned treasures only the stuffed Indian really excites us. Why don't

you bring him to life, L. L., and put him in a story? Reckon he'll make plenty medicine if you get to working on him.

As to those parrot feathers—L. L. is really in a tight about them! But we'll have to tell you about those feathers some other time. It has to do with L. L.'s friends Pablo and Felipe and the new Foreman homestead mentioned above, where L. L. is building a home in the high Jemez country of New Mexico. . . .

"The December 16th number of Western Story at hand and there is no need for me to say that I agree with Mr. Davis' letter in The Round-up," writes friend Arthur Williams, of Locust Valley, Long Island, New York. "I like all the authors writing for Western Story, but without Potluck Jones and Too-bad Tommy showing up about four times a year, Western Story has lost its interest for me; because, while all your writers are good, Ney N. Geer writes a brand of story that cannot be duplicated. You sure want to get after that man Geer and tell him his fans are becoming rather impatient and if he wants to save Western Story's scalp and his own to boot he had better come across real soon. Mr. Pierce's IRON MALEMUTE was thrilling to the end. Am glad to know we are to have another by him soon. And while I am about it, I want to say Luke Short has done a right smart job with DEAD FREIGHT FOR PIUTE."

We hasten to reply that we got in touch with "that man Geer" and he allows how he'll see what he "can do about those two happy-go-lucky gents—and pronto!" So just have patience, Potluck fans—Potluck and Tommy are due to take a pasear down Western Story way right shortly.

And we're mighty glad you liked Frank Pierce's IRON MALEMUTE, Mr. Williams. F. R. P. is busy on another long job for us, but unfortunately he and his young son were in a motor accident a short while ago and we reckon the new yarn will be some delayed. Frank escaped with minor injuries, but his boy is still in the hospital. We know you all join in our wishes for his speedy recovery.

Next week's Western Story brings you—

A full-length action novel by Walt Coburn—ALIAS RAWHIDE JONES. Ten years can change a Montana waddy into a border brush-popper, but when Moss Walker came home, he found the bounty hunters still sniffing out his backtrail. Don't miss this fast-paced story of a feud that began with a tar-and-feather party—and ended with fireworks that just about blew up an entire range.

The printer's ink Truman Cass used was mixed with gunpowder, but he didn't like the idea of writing his own obituary with it! Harry F. Olmsted writes a stirring story of a small-town editor who used words for weapons in his fight for justice. GUNSMOKE FOR HEADLINES is the brand on this one.

Also on the tally book for next week are notable stories and features by Wayne D. Overholser, Paul Ellsworth Triem, Glenn H. Wichman, Seth Ranger and many other outstanding Western Story writers.

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED—THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!

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THE ANGRY GHOST

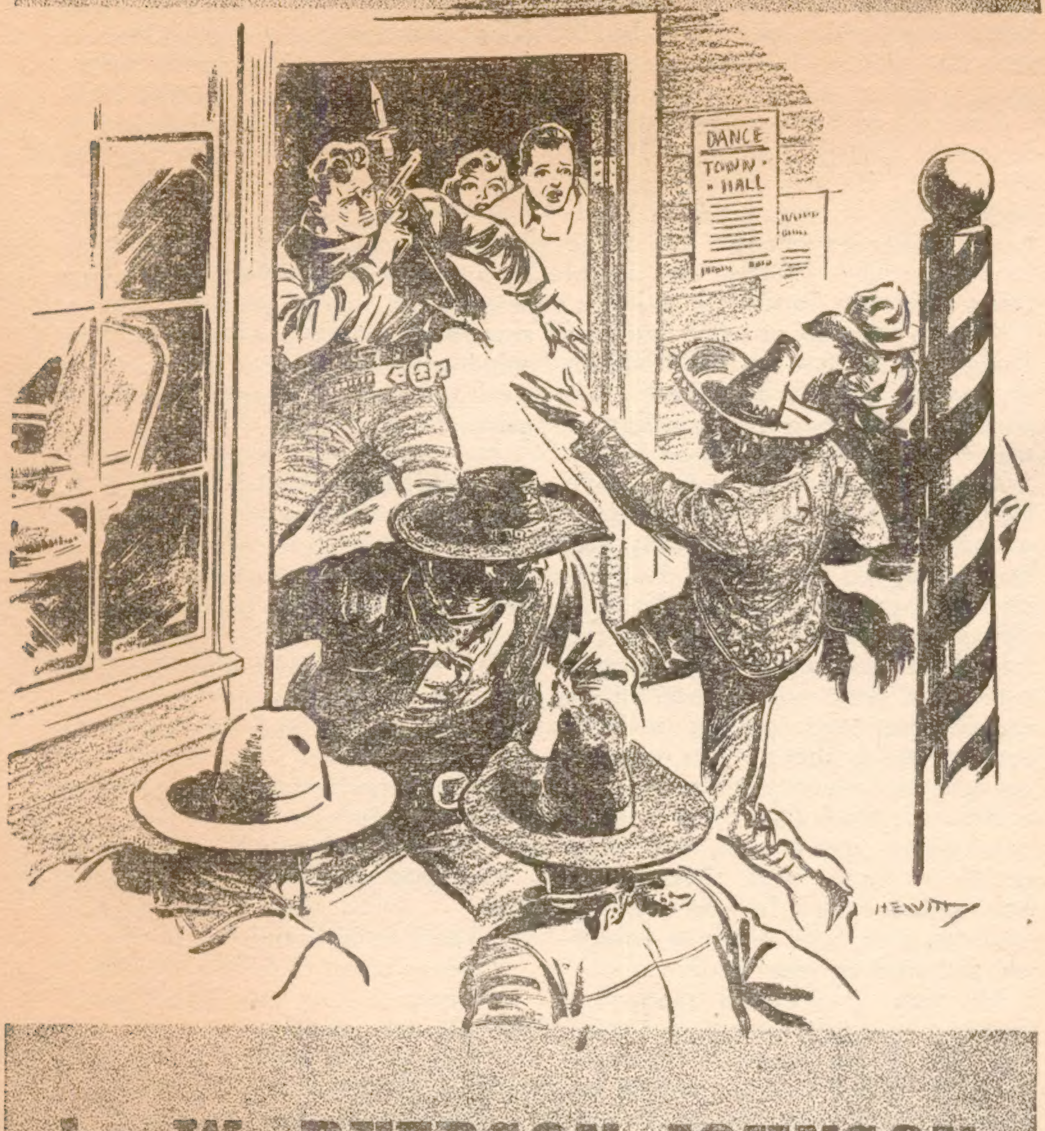
Do you believe in ghosts? Perhaps you don't. But even if you don't, you'll be amazed at the antics of "The Angry Ghost," in the complete book-length novel in the current issue of DOC SAVAGE Magazine. It's a ghost more powerful than most ethereal creatures, for it makes buildings crumble, bridges collapse, and the nation wake up to a dire emergency. And Doc Savage, modern superman, together with his fighting companions, wrestle with The Angry Ghost to save our land.

There's also a novelette featuring Bill Barnes, America's ace air adventurer, and other features making the February issue of

DOC SAVAGE

10c—EVERYWHERE

THE RED X BRAND



by W. RYERSON JOHNSON

CHAPTER I

NEW TOWNS TO TAME

BREATHING the stale gun smoke of morning, Charlie Bodman, frontier marshal, stood under the wooden awning of Albert Klein's barber shop in Gold Float, and surveyed the bullet-riddled street. Half the windows beneath the high, false fronts were shattered, with broken glass and wood splinters still cluttered around.

But such as it was, Gold Float belonged to Charlie Bodman. It was his town. He had bought it last night. Paid for it in blood and bullets. Broke the gun rule and made it a place where honest men could bring their wives and their children.

"The youngest marshal west of Dodge," was what Charlie Bodman was sometimes called. Charlie, the Gun-cat. The man with nine lives—and death for six in his trigger finger!

However young he might have been in years, he was old in the ways of gun talk. The Gun-cat tag had been hung on him when he first started throwing lead for the law. For more reasons than one. His long, lean body moved with springy ease. He went into a fast catlike crouch when he was pulling iron from leather, and in those telling seconds, his eyes had a greenish cast.

Relaxed, the Gun-cat was a pleasant-looking young man, with eyes certainly more blue than green, brown hair which bushed over his forehead in a curly tangle, a square-cut jaw and an easy grin.

He was an honored man, too. Perhaps he should have been a satisfied one. He had come in here, gone to work with his guns, and in less than a week he had things the way he wanted them. He could stay and be top-dog for the rest of his life—if he wanted to. But that was the trouble. Now that the town was tamed, he craved the excitement which, ironically, his own trigger finger had banished.

Charlie Bodman sighed. He put a twist on a brown paper quirly, lit up, pulled the smoke into his lungs, and turned to enter the barber shop for his morning shave.

An old man, a stranger in Gold Float, who had been covertly watching from a little way down the street, shuffled in after him. Charlie Bodman took a chair to await his turn, and the old man sat down next to him.

Out of sleepy eyes which saw more than they appeared to, Charlie Bodman took note that the oldster's face was worry lined, pinched. In a rangeland country where sun and wind seasoned a man's skin to a healthy brown, this man's face had a pasty "inside" look.

It couldn't have been prison pallor. His long hair ruled that out. It shagged down over his grimy collar and bushed in a gray tangle over his ears. He looked as though he had been cheating the barber all his natural life.

His eyes afforded a clue, if a man could read them. Little, round, unnaturally bright, and nervous as an animal's.

He kept muttering, leaning toward Charlie Bodman.

"The Rex X brand," he mumbled.

"What'd you say?" Charlie asked him.

"The Rex X brand."

"Never heard of it."

"I come a long way to tell you," the old man muttered.

"Talk a little louder."

"I don't dast."

"The Red X brand, you say?"

"That's right. You take a razor and come two ways with it across a man's throat and what have you got?"

"Death. Right sudden."

"That's right—by way of a red X."

"Like that, huh? What you comin' to me for?"

"You're the Gun-cat," the old codger said simply, and his tone implied: "You're the only one on earth who can do anything to help me."

CHARLIE BODMAN let smoke seep out of his mouth. The smoke banked thinly under his sombrero. It was an old trick of his. Under half cover of the smoke screen, he studied the old man who talked so fearfully of throat cutting. The old coot wasn't ordinary, Charlie decided. The burning zealousness in his eyes hinted that he had lived either a very good life or a very evil one. Too early to say which.

"Throw a wider loop, friend," Charlie Bodman told him.

The old man's hand darted with lizard swiftness, indicating the bullet-shattered barber-shop window and the general battle-scarred appearance of the stores across the street.

"What you done, cleanin' up this town, last night, makin' it a place where honest men can hold up their heads and breath deep again, you can do for Cottonwood Crossin'. I come from there, me and a young waddy name of Holt Clay. We come at the risk of our lives to find you and bring you back with us."

"Like that, huh?" the Gun-cat said slowly.

"Will you come?"

"Well, I dunno. No future in the gun-smoke business. They made me a good proposition in Gold Float. Been figurin' on settlin' down."

"The Gun-cat settlin' down? You're funnin', ain't you?"

"Never more serious in my life."

"I never was, either, son." The old man's voice carried desperate appeal. "Maybe you could put off settlin' down till you've tamed one more town. Cottonwood Crossin' can't wait. Hell's flamin' there so hot that right soon it'll be forever too late."

The Gun-cat felt a stirring of excitement in his blood, a tremoring of his nerve ends. He tried to deny the feeling was pleasant. He'd dished out enough fast-lead service. He'd earned him a little peace and quiet.

"Where's this friend of yours, you say come with you?" he asked.

"At the Saddle House," the old man answered eagerly. "He fought on your side last night. Up the whole night long. Plum tuckered. Catchin' him some shut-eye now. Mebbe so you remember him? Young 'un with an easy laugh, and shoulders that fill a doorway."

"I remember," the Gun-cat nodded. "He sided me all the way through. I remember his laugh when the lead came thickest."

The old man's hand clutched at Charlie Bodman's shirt. "Come along with me and talk to him. I'm only Old Herman. Old Herman Clegg. Sweep-out man in the barber shop at Cottonwood Crossin'. Reckon what I say don't count fer much. But Holt Clay'll tell you—"

"Ain't you waitin' for a haircut?" the Gun-cat interrupted.

"Huh? Haircut? Me?" A startled look crossed the oldster's face. The Gun-cat caught the look, and wondered. "Haircut?" the old man repeated. "Hell, no. Waitin' fer you, that's all. When a man's had his hair long as what I have, he gits used to it. Wouldn't no more think o' cuttin' it off than he would his fingers. Young Fritz Brown keeps tryin' to get me to leave him cut my hair. Young Fritz runs the barber shop all alone now, since his pappy died with the Red X sign on

him. Makes five that's been lowered in their graves wearin' a red collar. Nobody knows who'll be next. Could be anybody. Me or Holt Clay— Say, I hadn't ought to left the boy alone!"

Old Herman got up suddenly and started for the door. In his panic over the security of his companion, he seemed to have forgotten all about Charlie Gun-cat Bodman. The frontier marshal heard the whispered mutterings waft back.

"Hadn't ought to left him . . . hadn't ought to—"

Maybe the old coot was putting on an act, the Gun-cat reflected, but it wouldn't hurt to play this game out one more hand around.

Charlie caught up with the old man on the wooden sidewalk outside. He strode along beside him.

OLD HERMAN looked around. His red-veined eyes, so little and round, blinked in started recognition. "Gun-cat! I . . . I, this Red X business has mighty near got me out of my head." He rambled on, as an old man will. "Here's how it was. They knowed we was off to fetch you—"

"How'd they know?"

"They know everything. They follered us out from town. Took potshots at us. But we was sure we lost 'em till yesterday mornin' we woke up with the Red X brand painted on our boots!"

The Gun-cat looked at him narrowly. "What kind of locoed yarn is that? They could have branded your throat as easy as your boots."

"I know. Don't make sense, does it? Hardly any of it does. That's why we come lookin' fer you." Old Herman stopped, bent stiffly, pointed down. "You can see where I scraped the toes of my boots to get the paint off. We'd been campin' out. After that we moved into the Saddle House where we'd be safer. But I hadn't ought to left Holt alone."

A minute or two later even the Gun-cat was ready to admit that Holt Clay should not have been left alone.

At the Saddle House, Old Herman led the way, muttering, up the steps and down the hall. He tried the door. It was locked. He called Holt Clay's name and pounded on the panels.

"He sleeps some sound, don't he?" remarked the Gun-cat.

"No, he don't!" Old Herman said. His pasty face had an even more worried look. He fumbled in his pockets, found the key.

With the door opening inward, Old Herman rushed inside—and stopped with a cry, that for sheer terror, faded anything the Gun-cat had ever heard. His scrawny frame shook, and his little, round eyes bulged out.

His knees wabbled and he would have fallen if the Gun-cat, pushing in close after him, hadn't caught him and held him up. The room clerk from downstairs heard the uproar, and he took the steps three at a time.

"What's the matter—" he began, and stopped.

In a pool of his own clotted blood, young Holt Clay lay on the bed. At first sight, he seemed to be foolishly grinning. But it wasn't his mouth which yawned wide open. It was his throat.

The Red X brand had been carved on it!

CHAPTER II

A NEW JOB FOR THE GUN-CAT

AS soon as Old Herman pulled himself together and quit babbling, he faced the Gun-cat in the murder room and pleaded with him fiercely.

"Now will you come with me to Cottonwood Crossin'?" he asked, desperately.

The Gun-cat licked another of his brown paper cigarettes, put a twist on it slowly. "Looks like we've got some shakin' down to do, right here. When was the last you saw Holt Clay, and he was all right?"

"Couple hours ago. I left him sleepin' and went to the restaurant downstairs and then to the barber shop."

The Gun-cat looked at the clerk. "Who came up to his room?"

"Ain't been no one but the regular roomers pass my desk all mornin'," the man answered.

The Gun-cat walked to the window. It was nailed shut. The dust of days was heavy on the nail. He tried the window, anyhow. It didn't budge.

"Nothin' fake about the way that nail is drove," the hotel clerk assured him. "I put it in there myself when we had the last dust storm. Window ain't been opened since."

A match bloomed under the rasp of the Gun-cat's thumb nail. He put the flame to his cigarette. "No other way to get in here except the door, and as far as we can tell, it's been all the time locked. Yet a man lies here with his throat cut."

"It . . . it never happened before," the clerk muttered.

The word had gone around outside and a morbid-minded crowd pressed at the doorway, craning necks to see what another man looked like with his neck half cut off.

All at once, Old Herman gave another of his flesh-crawling howls and pointed a trembling finger at Bodman.

"It's on you!"

"What's on me?"

"The death mark! The Red X brand!"

The Gun-cat let smoke seep out of his mouth. "Where?"

"Behind you. Your pocket."

Bodman felt at his pocket. Nothing there but his handkerchief. An end of it was sticking out. He pulled the rest of it out. It was an ample-sized handkerchief, with inch-square blue-and-white checks.

"That's it!" Old Herman groaned. "On the handkerchief. The death brand!"

The Gun-cat saw what had caught the man's eye. A Red X on the white corner square. He turned the handkerchief over. The brand went all the way through. Red ink, apparently. He rubbed his thumb across it hard. It smudged a little. The brand was fresh. It had been placed on the handkerchief since he entered the room!

THERE was nothing dramatic about Charlie Bodman's next move. He didn't go into his famous cat-crouch. Only his wrist seemed to move, and only a few of the more alert were even aware of that. But every man of them was aware of the six-gun, once it had cleared leather.

Charlie held the gun, carelessly, it seemed, close in to his side, and his voice was lazy. But not a man missed the purring menace underneath.

"Inside the room, everybody."

They pushed in, wondering, some of them frightened. The cigarette still clung to the Gun-cat's lips.

"Shove your hands out where I can look at 'em," he ordered.

The hands went out in prompt obedience.

"Palm's up," Bodman directed, then went down the line examining each hand carefully. He included even the hotel clerk and Old Herman in his scrutiny.

"All right, relax."

"What's the idea, Gun-cat?" one of the men wanted to know.

He told them. "Since I've come in here someone's put a Red X mark on my handkerchief. Easiest way it could have been done was for the Red X to be transferred from somebody's thumb onto my handkerchief. Any of you could have had the chance, the way you been millin' around the room. I was wonderin' if I'd find a red ink smudge on anyone's thumb."

"Did you find it, Gun-cat?" someone asked the question that was on the lips of all.

"No, I didn't find it," he answered. "Keep standin' where you are. I'm goin' to pad you down. If I don't find what I'm lookin' for, you can all leave."

Meekly they stood there, the hotel clerk, Old Herman Clegg, all of them, while Charlie went through their clothes. He didn't find what he was looking for.

But with the last man checked, the Gun-cat's blue-green eyes probed the room to its four corners. And almost immediately he found it! In a wide crack between two floorboards. A small glass phial containing red ink.

He held it up where all could see. "Anyone claim it?"

No one did.

"Finders, keepers, I reckon," he said cynically, and slipped it in his pocket. He jerked his head. "School's out."

They started to go, some in an obvious hurry to get away, others reluctantly.

One of the most reluctant was Old Herman Clegg. "No!" he protested. "Don't let them get away! Somebody here is a murderer. The same one who carved the Red X brand on Holt Clegg's throat. It's a bottom-ace cinch he put the X brand on you. First paint, then blood. The same like at Cottonwood Crossin'. Don't leave the murderer walk out of here!"

"There were about fifteen men in the room," the Gun-cat said dryly. "Can you pick out the one?"

"No, but—"

"You recollect ever seein' any of these men in Cottonwood Crossin'?"

"No, but—"

Charlie Bodman's hand sliced the air with finality. "School's out."

This time, only Old Herman remained.

"Are you jus' leavin' it go at that?" he questioned despairingly. "Gun-cat, listen to me. Peaceful ways ain't fer you. You'd plumb stifle in air that didn't have a little gun lead in it. You've dedicated your life, Gun-cat, you have, just the same as a sky pilot or a sawbones, to helpin' those that needs it. Cottonwood Crossin' needs you most desperate. Are you just goin' to leave things go like this?"

"Herman, there's more ways of trappin' hydrophobia skunks than has ever been tried."

The old man caught at the promise in the words. "Then you'll come with me to Cottonwood Crossin'?"

"Old Herman, we sleep tonight, you and me, at the same place where you woke up with the Red X branded on your boots. If I'm still alive in the mornin', I'll consider hazin' along with yuh."

Old Herman's little eyes burned fiercely. "God bless you, Gun-cat," he said with trembling fervor.

CHAPTER III

THE UNHOLY FOUR

THAT night at sundown, they threw their bed rolls in among the willows at Crooked Wash Creek, a mile from town.

Gem Voorhis made his last mistake when he drew against the Gun-cat.

"This the exact place?" Charlie Bodman questioned.

Old Herman nodded. "You can even see where we tromped the grass down fer rattlers."

He was tromping near by while he spoke, and it was well that he did. There was a warning *whir-r-r,* a rattle that ended in an echoing roar as Old Herman wrestled his six-gun out, threw down and pulled trigger. It was smooth, fast gun action, exceptional for a man his age.

The Gun-cat stepped over where the grass was moving. For a moment he stood looking down. "You're as accurate as you are fast, my friend." He picked up the still writhing snake. "Smack in the eye."

"I seen it glint," Old Herman muttered.

"You must practice plenty," the Gun-cat observed.

"Naw." There seemed to be a vague uneasiness in Old Herman's voice. But all he said was, "Grippin' the push broom in the barber shop keeps my hands loosened up. But that was just a luck shot."

Bodman threw down the snake. "Long as you're on my side, Old Herman, I hope your luck holds."

In the West the sun bedded down in a vast sea of grass. It was an angry red sun that looked hot enough to ignite the dried grass. But it merely sent fiery streamers halfway around the sky. Hot colors, blazing red, orange, purple, that spoke of violence.

Then the sun was gone and the moon was there, a cool white disk, floating high, putting a silvery shimmer over the grassland, making a thing of beauty out of even so ordinary a growth as a *cholla* cactus.

The Gun-cat burned a cigarette down to his lips, then ground the

glowing end under his heel. Old Herman had already stretched out for the night. The Gun-cat lay down beside him. Around them were the night noises, the rasps and peepings of insects, and, distantly, the sad, nerve-tingling cry of a coyote.

The Gun-cat's ears were strained for another noise—grass crunched under foot by a slinking Red X killer. What, next time, would be the killer's whim—to mark his Red X harmlessly on cloth, or on a man's throat?

For a long while they lay there, not speaking, but each tensely aware that the other was awake. The Gun-cat was the first to start breathing regularly. It was the deep, hearty breathing of the man who lives his life in the open, under the sun and under the stars.

Old Herman Clegg raised up on an elbow and watched the Gun-cat for a long while. Then he, too, lay back. He sighed deeply and was soon asleep.

AS for Charlie Gun-cat Bodman, he didn't sleep at all that night. At times he pretended to. But at no moment did he quite let go his hold on consciousness. It wasn't jumpy nerves which kept him awake; it was cool resolve.

Unless a man has tried to stay awake all night—while pretending to sleep—he has no idea of the magnitude of the task. To stir around and worry, lasting the night out in wakefulness is a simple enough matter; but to relax, resting body and mind, and never quite sleep, hour after black hour, is something different.

An animal can do it. And so could the Gun-cat. As frontier marshal for one hell-raising town after another, he fed on danger. It was in every breath he took. And he had disciplined every part of his body to respond to his will. It was one reason he had lived so long. His six-gun magic was another reason.

With the sun of morning streaming gold across the tawny rangeland, soaking up the night chill, the two men sat up and stretched.

Old Herman rubbed his bright little eyes and smiled benignly. "You look like you had a nice sleep," he said.

"I feel right rested," the Gun-cat told him.

Old Herman felt with stringy fingers at his throat. "We . . . we don't seem to have any Red X on our throats."

"Or anywhere else."

"How do you know?"

"I stayed awake to make sure. I've got a confession, Old Herman."

"Yes?" the old man said placidly.

"A man who lives by his guns, whether on the side of the law or against it, can't afford to take anything for granted. My stayin' awake was a kind of last test for you. I'm glad to say you passed it with flyin' colors."

Old Herman looked troubled. "You mean, you didn't trust me?"

"Wouldn't go so far's to say that. Reserved my opinion, that's all. Last night I gave you a chance to put the Red X brand on my throat if you'd wanted to, or anyhow, I appeared to give you the chance. But you didn't try anything. So I'm straight in my mind about you now, Old Herman. You spoke nothin' but truth when you said you wanted me to come to Cottonwood Crossin'—All right, let's boil up some coffee, then we'll be rackin' along."

ON the high rimrock overlooking Cottonwood Crossin', the Gun-cat and Old Herman stopped for a war parley. The sun-soaked little

town that lay below didn't look in any way extraordinary. It had been a trail town since the earliest times. The overland stage had stopped here in the days when the United States cavalry had to ride herd on it to prevent the Comanches from using it for a bonfire.

A stage line still served the town, for Cottonwood Crossing was a natural pass through this rough, Big Thunder country. There were railroads tapping the West. Some day one of them would take advantage of this water-level route. The clank of chain traces would pass into history. The horse relays would be iron horses, snorting steam. Fed with coal, and groomed in a smoky roundhouse.

But now the town drowsed pleasantly in its cottonwood grove.

"You sure this is the place, Old Herman?" the Gun-cat questioned. "Looks uncommon peaceful."

"It's too far from here," Old Herman muttered, "to see people's faces. The fear of Red X death is in the eyes of everybody. It's like it was a doomed town. A town of walkin' ghosts. Year from now it'll be a ghost town for certain, with every last man gone to his death, or scared away—unless you can do somethin', Gun-cat. There's a few down there that still hopes. I'll point 'em out to you. They'll rally around when they know you're on their side. I'm thinkin' it ain't too late, yet."

"You sure these, now, Red X killers will leave you back in town?"

"Yes. They ain't like to bother me. I'm jus' Old Herman who sweeps out in the barber shop. They already got Holt Clay. He was the main one they were after. He's the one who was kickin' the Red Xers in the teeth. Me, like I said, I'm just Old Herman. Holt Clay asked me to go with him and I did. But now, after what they done to Holt, they'll figger my speerit is plumb broke."

The Gun-cat looked thoughtful. "Tell you what, you go on in alone. I'll follow along in a day or so. Seein' as these throat-cuttin' gents are operatin' so secret, maybe I better not advertise myself right at the start. So if you recognize me, don't let on. I'll find a way to contact you at the barber shop."

"That's the place," Old Herman said tragically. "But take keer around there, Gun-cat. Sounds locoed to say it about a barber shop, but it's like the place was haunted. I used to admire to hear the scissors snippin' hair. It was a soothin' sound. But since they put the Red X on Mr. Brown's throat, them scissors sounds like guillotine blades to me. Somethin' plumb unnatural about that shop, and you take keer."

"Somethin' new, ain't it, for all the hell fire and damnation that's turned loose in a town to center at the barber shop? It's most usual a saloon."

"There's a saloon, too—the Black Buffalo. Duce Wen runs it. But you'll do better at the barber shop. At the saloon, you're like to have to buck the whole string, but at the barber shop they come one at a time."

"Must be a clean-shaven bunch of boys."

"They are now. All of 'em wasn't before this Red X business took the town by the throat. That's why I say, there's somethin' locoed about that shop. I ought to know. I'm there all day sweepin'. Sometimes I can feel it in the air, an evil force, the air kind o' quiverin'."

"Like that, huh?" The Gun-cat leaned from saddle and patted Old Herman on the back. "Keep out of the sun," he said, and grinned. Old Herman's face did not lighten.

"You'll find out when you get down there, that everythin's like I said."

"Sure—sure. Now, you were mentionin' some names?"

WITH sputtering eagerness, the old man tumbled out the words: "Duce Wen, o' course. And Gem Voorhis, Claw Cranberry, Murdo Pasquele—the unholy four, I call 'em."

"Wait a minute. Come slower, old-timer."

"Gem Voorhis is a swaggerin' young hellion that hangs out at the Black Buffalo Saloon," the old man explained. "No visible means of support except his six-gun. I seen him once, myself, shoot a man in the back of the head and laugh about it. Been makin' a play of late for Judie Lane. You'll be meetin' her."

"Keep your mind off the women, old-timer. You was mentionin' some other gunnies."

Old Herman nodded. "Murdo Pasquele. A *mestizo* from down under the border that ought 'a' be flattered if you called him a sidewinder. And Claw Cranberry—"

"I've heard about *him*. One of the long-haired gentry."

"That's right. Old-time hooter that's come down out of the hills to take cover with the rest of 'em at the Black Buffalo. Duce Wen, like I said, runs the Black Buffalo, along with a spread he calls the Bar B. He's the worst of the lot. Them men are the unholy four. You want to keep an eye on all of 'em until you, anyhow, get a lead on somethin' better."

"Ain't there nothin' ties 'em in direct with the Red X murders?"

Old Herman fidgeted. "No," he admitted. "Not direct. To be honest, it's more a feelin' I got than anything else. But everybody in town's got the same feelin'. And them four is about the only ones that don't look worried. You size things up for yourself, but keep them four in mind—"

CHAPTER IV

A MUGFULL OF DYNAMITE

THE next morning, in Fritz Brown's barber shop in Cottonwood Crossing, three men sat waiting their turn in the chair. It was a two-chair shop, but since Fritz's father had been buried with the Red X brand on his throat, one of the chairs had been collecting dust.

The day was hot. The sweet, damp odors of assorted dandruff cures and "flower juices" was like a drug. Almost as overpowering, was the metallic *snip-snip-snip-snipping* sound of the scissors, the monotonous *shuff-shuff* of Old Herman Clegg's push broom. Two of the waiting men sprawled in their chairs in a barber-shop doze. The third seemed almost as far gone, but a brown paper cigarette that was hung on his lip, drained smoke.

Range clad, holstered, this man looked like any boomer cowboy with nothing on his mind but a haircut. But through the haze of smoke which hung in a thin curtain under the brim of his sombrero, his blue-green eyes watched everything that went on in the room.

Men came and went, and the barber kept up a steady line of talk. Everything seemed peaceful, but there was something strange about it all.

Some of the boys who dropped in for a shave didn't seem particularly in need of one. Some didn't even wait their turn. But instead of looking in at the door and seeing how many were ahead of them, they came in, moved restlessly about the cluttered room, their fingers reaching out to touch things here and

there. Then after an exchange of commonplaces with the barber they went out again.

The man with the blue-green eyes seemed to stir to wakefulness after the departure of one such rover. He corralled his cigarette between thumb and finger and spoke to the man dozing in the chair next to his.

"The fella who just went out—Bob Rainsford from the K J, wasn't it?"

The man peered sleepily out the door. "Who him? Naw, that's Moonface Jackson. Ramrods the Bar B."

"The Bar B? Duce Wen's spread?"

"Kee-rect."

"Doin' any hirin'?"

"Fella can always try."

The screen door opened and slammed, and another man came in.

"There's three ahead of you, George," the barber said.

"George" was a leather-faced, bandy-legged cowpuncher. He grunted at the barber and went on the same kind of absent-minded prowl about the room as the others had done. No one seemed to pay him any attention. But out of half-closed, blue-green eyes, the Gun-cat watched every move he made. The man's hand flicked out, casually it seemed, to thump against the hat-rack, to brush a few hairs from the arm of the unoccupied barber chair, to adjust one of the barber mugs on the shelf so that its handle lined up with the others.

Then he told the barber, "Reckon I'll come back a little later."

"Won't be but a few minutes. Why don't you wait?"

"I'll come back."

"Suit yourself, George."

The man went out, and the Gun-cat turned again to the man who dozed in the chair beside him. The Gun-cat took a chance and asked, "George still ridin' for the Bar B?"

"Yeah," the man grunted an uninterested answer.

The Gun-cat stood up then, stretched himself leisurely, and went on a prowl of his own. From the moment he brushed his fingers through the dust on the chair of the murdered barber, he was aware of a quickening in the room. The dozing men seemed to jerk to wakefulness. They made no move, but the Gun-cat knew they were watching him.

When he clinked his finger nail along the line of barber mugs on the shelf, even the *snip-snip* of the barber's scissors broke its rhythm, and the *shuf-shuf-shuf* of Old Herman Clegg's push broom ceased. When the Gun-cat picked up the same mug which the man they called George had straightened in the row, the tension in the room increased to where it could almost be said to crackle.

"Stranger," the barber said, holding Bodman under a cold eye, "maybe you don't know, but that's high-percentage dynamite you've got in your hand. You don't want to get blowed to pieces, do you? Then set it down easylike, and don't never monkey with the mugs again."

"Looks like a ordinary mug to me," the Gun-cat said, unperturbed. He turned it over. The soap was stuck tight in the bottom. "What's so uncommon dangerous about it?"

THE barber had quit cutting hair now, and he held the scissors between tight fingers, almost as though he gripped a knife for stabbing. He was young, this son of the murdered barber, and he didn't conceal his emotions too well. His eyes were hostile. So was his voice.

"What's dangerous about that

mug? Stranger, it's jus' possible that's somethin' you know better'n me."

The Gun-cat shrugged, returned the mug to the shelf. The barber continued his haircutting, and the men on the waiting line, apparently settled back to dozing.

After a while the barber said, "All right," and the customer in his chair got up, stretched, yawned, and paid his bill.

The barber started stropping a razor. He tried the edge against his calloused thumb. Then he looked over at Charlie Bodman.

"Stranger, you're next."

He was wrong about that. It wasn't the Gun-cat who was next. It was the girl.

She ran into the shop, letting the screen door slam shut behind her, and colliding with the Gun-cat as he was stepping toward the barber chair. Bodman got only a glance at her, but it was the look more than the collision that took his breath away. There was something about the soft curve of her lips, red against a skin as smooth and creamy as the petals on a yucca flower. Something about her eyes, too, dark and lustrous, and her hair, black as midnight in a canyon.

"You'll be meetin' her," Old Herman had predicted. "Purtiest girl in Cottonwood Crossin'—or anywheres else, I reckon."

At the time, Old Herman had seemed to be taking in a lot of territory, but now the Gun-cat was ready to admit that the old codger had called the turn. He felt a stirring in his blood, and it was oddly akin to the way he felt when he was about to take on an action job, where he couldn't tell for certain how things were going to end, but where he could be almighty sure of excitement in big chunks.

Where she went was a surprise to everybody. She flung herself into Fritz Brown's barber chair.

It was only then that the Gun-cat had a chance to see that her face was pinched with fear, and that she was breathing hard and almost on the point of collapse.

As soon as she could catch her breath she gasped, "Hide me, Fritz! Quick! Throw your apron over me. Cover my hair with a wet towel—anything!" She leaned forward, grabbed Fritz Brown's "working" mug from the shelf, and commenced daubing lather on her face.

There was an instant when her red lips showed through the whiteness of the lather. The lips moved. "You take the brush, Fritz. Quick! Put soap everywhere but my eyes. Oh, quick! Don't stand there—"

"But what—"

"Why don't you do like Miss Judie says?" It was a quiet voice at the barber's elbow, Charlie Bodman's.

And now from outside sounded a strenuous clumping on the wooden sidewalk. Fritz Brown came out of his daze and worked frantically, concealing the girl as she had directed.

THE running steps came closer. Outside they stopped. The screen door was pushed open. It slammed shut and a man, an arrogant, hulking individual wearing two guns, stood just inside, his face a furious red with several fingernail scratches down both cheeks, his eyes daggering about the shop.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

Nobody said anything, and the man fastened his wrathful stare on Fritz Brown, standing there in a curiously defiant attitude in front of the barber chair, an opened razor in his hand.

"Where is she?" the newcomer demanded again hoarsely.

"What in hell you talkin' about, Gem?" Fritz snapped, and half turned, as though to dismiss him and go to work on the customer in his chair.

"She came in here. I seen her from down the street."

"You must be locoed from the heat," Fritz told him. "Maybe she turned in between the buildin's—whoever you're talkin' about."

"You know who I'm talkin' about!" Gem Voorhis stamped threateningly closer. "Where you hidin' her?"

"You can see there ain't no girl in here," Fritz argued. "Ask the customers."

The customers backed him up. They shrugged their shoulders, staring sleepily. *They* hadn't seen anyone.

"When I find her, I aim to twist her apart, see?" Gem Voorhis said.

Fritz Brown's face was white. He trembled and gripped the razor tighter.

"Go on, shave your customer," Voorhis ordered. "And make it snappy. While I'm here, I'll take a shave myself."

"There's three ahead of you," Fritz muttered.

But Voorhis wasn't discouraged. "The hell you say! When I come in, the rest takes a back seat, an' you know it." He came still closer, glaring at the apron-covered occupant of the chair. "What's he all screwed up like that for?"

"He . . . he's a sawed-off runt," Fritz said desperately. "His feet won't show from under the apron. He moved closer to the chair and started stropping his razor.

"Somethin' don't look right about it," Voorhis said suspiciously. "What you got so many towels on his head for?"

With one swoop of his big hand, he reached over and pulled the towels away. Judie Lane's shining black hair tumbled out in every direction.

"I thought so!" That big hand snatched down again, fingers outspread, to jerk the girl up by her hair.

"No, you don't!" Fritz was ready for action now. Stalling hadn't worked. Disregarding the potential danger of those holstered .45s, he went in with the razor. The sharp blade sliced through the gunman's sleeve, drew blood from a long, deep scratch on the arm muscle to match the blood from the scratches on his face where Judie Lane's fingernails had clawed.

Voorhis rocked back on his heels, his chunky face livid with rage. His hand went down as he snagged at one of his holstered guns.

"I'll show you!" he snarled.

"Show me, mister!" It was Gun-cat Bodman's arresting voice.

But Gem Voorhis didn't show anybody. Not then. Because his feet tangled with Old Herman's push broom, his thick arms windmilled, and he fell.

Old Herman backed toward the door in panic, muttering. "I didn't go to do it, Gem. It was a accident!"

"Accident, hell! I seen you. Tripped me a-purpose." Voorhis lunged to his feet, gun hard-gripped. "You had it a long time comin' to you, Herman, now take it!"

With the thick finger cuddling the trigger, the weapon lined down on Old Herman's stomach and roared.

But it was only a reflex trigger pull and the shot crashed through the front window, yards wide of its intended target. That was because the Gun-cat had triggered a shade sooner.

His bullet, splaying against the cylinder of Gem Voorhis' leveled gun, knocked it from the gunman's hand. It clumped on the floor. Voorhis stared foolishly at his empty, tingling hand, then turned rage-filled eyes at Bodman.

So far as Gem Voorhis was aware, Charlie was just another hardware-packing cowpoke. He had returned his gun to holster, and now he stood in an easy slouch. There was nothing of the Gun-cat about him except that his half-closed eyes seemed to be showing more green than blue. They appeared to be sleepy though, and that, perhaps, was what deceived Gem Voorhis.

"You got another gun," Charlie said, almost gently. "Use it or get out."

"I'll use it!" bellowed Voorhis.

But he was wrong again. He had made several mistakes in a row. Now he made his last one.

He drew—but before he could pull the trigger, the Gun-cat made his own play and shot Gem Voorhis dead with a single bullet through the brain.

The man's huge body made a sodden clump as it toppled to the floor.

While the onlookers stared, aghast and unbelieving, the Gun-cat looked around for Old Herman. The eyes of the sweep-out man blazed with a curious fire. His knobby fingers on the broom handle were white from tension. He was breathing in short, explosive bursts.

"You all right, Old Herman," Charlie asked in concern.

At sound of the Gun-cat's voice the old man snapped to life. "All right," he echoed. "I . . . I— By bringin' death to him, you've brought hope of life to us all! How can we thank you?" His voice trailed off to vague exultant mutterings. "There were four; now there's only three!"

"Maybe you better get some sawdust," the Gun-cat remarked dryly, "and sprinkle it around where the blood is."

CHAPTER V

THEN THERE WERE TWO

THE morning gunfire, the broken window glass, brought men running from all parts of town. They crowded through the door, milling about the barber shop, and staring silently at the dead man on the floor. Staring, too, at the man who had killed him.

Old Herman, at Charlie's suggestion, had reported back that he had been unable to secure the town-taming services of Charlie Gun-cat Bodman. There was no one in the crowd whose back trail had in any way tangled with that of the famous frontier marshal. And Charlie was careful to move in such a manner that the easy animallike flex of his muscles didn't give him away.

Consequently, they all made the same mistake that Gem Voorhis had made. They failed to recognize him as the Gun-cat, took him for just another gun-smoking waddy on the loose. But he had killed a tough and hated man, and there was an odd rigidity of expression on the features of all who so silently watched him. They had the appearance of men who wanted to talk, but were afraid.

The town marshal, Elmer Woody, was one of the first on hand. He talked. To Gun-cat Bodman.

"You kill this man?" he demanded.

The Gun-cat nodded bleakly.

Elmer Woody tapped with stubby fingernails on the law badge pinned to his leather vest. "I'll have to take you in."

The Gun-cat's eyes narrowed.

showing some of that dangerous green. "How come?" he inquired.

"There's law in this town. You killed a man. Comin' easy, or do you aim to make it tough for us both?"

The Gun-cat stared at the officer, weighing the possibilities. Here was a man with more stubbornness than imagination in his make-up. Hard eyes, bulldog jaw, and a general tightness about the features that could indicate secretiveness. He could be honest or crooked. No way to tell, right off. The Gun-cat took a shot in the dark.

"You're not foolin' me, mister," he said. "You want to throw me in jail where someone'll have easy cuttin' when they go to put a Red X on my throat."

He watched narrowly for the effect of his talk. It was a strategy he had used with success before. Lay it into a man heavy when he's not expecting it. Throw him off guard. Get him to talking before he thinks. Sometimes he'll reveal more than he wants to.

In this case, Elmer Woody's face grew red as a beet. It seemed to swell, and there was no doubting that the eyes bulged. He took a step backward, which put him on better balance for a draw at his gun. Men pushed aside hastily to give him bullet room. It looked for a certainty, as though his temper would show in his gun hand before it did in his words.

THERE was a quick cry then, and the girl, Judie Lane, pushed in between them. With the lather wiped from her face and the terror gone from her eyes, she was just as lovely as she had appeared to the Gun-cat in his one short look at her. She talked to the marshal, pleading passionately.

"It was a fair fight. It was more than a fair fight. This man even let Gem Voorhis draw first."

"Where do you come into it, Judie?" Elmer Woody asked.

"Gem Voorhis, he . . . he's been annoying me for a long while." The girl's eyes flashed. "I was passing the Black Buffalo and he reached his big hand out and pulled me in. Laughing that same way he did when he killed—" She bit her tongue, shot a nervous glance around. "Well, anyway, I fought him. I clawed his face. The marks are still on it. I got away and ran in here with him after me. Fritz tried to hide me. Gem Voorhis was in such a rage that he was going to kill Fritz and Old Herman both—"

"But the stranger got to him first," Fritz put in.

"Who are you, stranger?" the law officer asked the Gun-cat.

"My name's Chester Nekkut," Charlie Bodman told him.

"Nekkut? Uncommon name. One I ought to know?"

"Naw," Charlie told him. "I'm just a boomer barber. Heard there was a chair goin' empty in Cottonwood Crossin'. I was just gonna brace Mr. Brown for a job when all the trouble started. Me, I'm a peaceful man. Maybe I picked the wrong town."

"If you're a peaceful man, I reckon you did," Elmer Woody said laconically. He turned away. "I'll be seein' you again."

The Gun-cat shook tobacco in a paper and looked at the girl. "Thank you, Miss Judie," he said. "I don't think that man likes me much."

"He ain't the only one that don't," a new voice grated.

Charlie located the speaker in the crowd, a hard-bitten, long-haired, stamped-in-the-leather gunny, if he ever saw one.

"If I was guessin'," the Gun-cat let out slowly, "I'd say Claw Cranberry—with notches on his ears."

"If I was guessin' about you," Claw Cranberry snarled, "I'd say gun fodder."

Charlie bit at the yellow strings, closed his tobacco bag. "Maybe my guess is more accurate'n yours."

"Then again, maybe it ain't," growled Claw Cranberry. "The man you took lead measurements on between the eyes was my pard. And *his* pard." He indicated the man next to him, a squat, swarthy-faced individual who wore a greasy *charo* jacket, and a sash of dirty red wool wrapped many times about his middle. "You're so good at guessin', barber; maybe you can call his name, too?"

The Gun-cat bowed mockingly. "Murdo Pasquele, pleased to make your acquaintance." The *mestizo* scowled, and Charlie continued, "Now if I could meet Duce Wen, my happiness would be flowin' over."

"You'll meet him," Claw Cranberry promised. "Quicker'n you like."

"On thees other han'," Pasquele drawled, "maybe he won' meet heem at all."

Claw Cranberry pulled at his companion. "Come on, Murdo. Let's be gettin' out of here. It ain't our time." They turned away, and in Murdo Pasquele's eyes there was a look of crafty speculation.

"Ain't you forgottin' somethin'?" the Gun-cat called after them.

"I never forget anything," Claw Cranberry tossed back meaningly.

"I'm talkin' about Gem Voorhis. Ain't you takin' your pard, that you claim to value so much?"

"Alive he was our pard. Dead, what is he?"

"That's one way to look at it," the Gun-cat admitted.

MEN of Cottonwood Crossing, craning their necks at the door, moved hastily back as the hard-bitten pair pushed through. Claw Cranberry shouldered out first, with Murdo Pasquele close after him. The crowd started taking up the slack as soon as they had gone through. Murdo picked this instant to whirl on his heels, with his hand snaring something from the folds of his sash.

Morning sunlight flashed on knife steel, followed the blade in a searing glint as it left Murdo's hand on a death line for Charlie Bodman's throat.

The *mestizo* had been clever. He had timed the knife throw so that in case of a miss, the in-pressing waves of men would be so close together, that the Gun-cat would have no chance to line down lead.

At the same time, he didn't intend to miss. He could split the ace on a playing card as far away as he could see it, and his knife whipped air now on a line for the throat.

Maybe it had been the slinker-wolf look in the *mestizo's* eyes which had warned the Gun-cat. Maybe it was only a gunner's hunch.

Whatever it was, his brain flashed the warning. But not in time to move his body from the bulletlike path of that glinting knife. Not in time to move his whole body. In time, though, for a reflex movement of his highly sensitized gun hand.

That hand slashed up with a quick swiveling movement of his wrist. The barrel of his six-gun traveled a short arc. There was a metallic clash, a grating of metal on metal, a high whining in the ears of the dumfounded spectators, and a flashing in their eyes as the knife collided with the gun barrel and slithered off over their heads.

The Gun-cat had saved his life.

He had warded off the knife. But he couldn't shoot in return. Murdo Pasquele had planned well about that. The two waves of men had come together, as was inevitable. For the moment they formed an unwilling, but solid wall. The Gun-cat couldn't shoot. Not into them.

But over them was a different thing.

His tensioned muscles carried him in a cat leap onto the barber chair in about the time it would ordinarily take a fast man to draw a gun. He sank one shot—over their heads, out the door—into the head of Murdo Pasquele.

That was all there was to it. Men pushed, cursed, and fought to get out the door, away from the barber shop. But by that time the shooting was over.

Elmer Woody pushed in and stood there like a wooden Indian, staring at the empty shop, at the two bullet-dropped men, at the boomer barber who claimed his name was Chester Nekkut.

The town marshal cleared his throat, and looked hard at the Gun-cat. "I've changed my mind about you. I reckon I'll call you Close-shave Chessy."

The Gun-cat thought it was probably expected of him to register a little pleasure at the marshal's trust, so he did; but in his heart he was cold. He hadn't yet made up his mind about the marshal.

FRITZ BROWN hung up an "Out Eating Dinner" sign on the red-and-white-striped pole outside the shop, and locked the screen door. Then a council of war was held inside the shop. This time Fritz, Judie Lane, Old Herman Clegg, Marshal Elmer Woody, and the brimstone barber, Chester Nekkut, all participated.

"I got to admit," the marshal said, "that at first, I figgered our new barber here, for just one more Black Buffalo hellion payin' off a grudge. But when he bagged his second Black Buffalo man, I had to give him credit."

The more the marshal built him up, the colder it left the Gun-cat. He hadn't taken Old Herman on trust. Nor did he now let the law badge on Elmer Woody's flapping vest lull him into careless confidences. None knew better than the Gun-cat that there were crooks both inside the law and out of it. When they were clever, the only way to tag them was to watch and wait.

But if Elmer Woody realized he was on the Gun-cat's observation list, he gave no sign.

"I better deputize you," he said. "This ain't one of them wide-open towns like you hear about. We got law enforcement here, even if it does get bogged down. If I deputize you it'll make it more legal if anyone squawks—just in case there's further lead arguments."

"There's two more comin' up, marshal," Old Herman piped excitedly. He beamed at the Gun-cat. "If I didn't see it with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it. No, sir. In town two hours, and it's already two dead and two to go."

"Herman been pointin' out some of our more influential citizens?" the marshal asked.

The Gun-cat held his tongue, considering the advisability of putting Old Herman on record. But the old man talked for himself.

"You're dadburn right I have," he said, proudly.

The Gun-cat addressed himself to Judie Lane. "Question I'd like to ask you. When you were explaining to the marshal about Gem Voorhis, you started to say somethin' about

Voorhis killin' someone. But you pulled your punch on it. Why?"

The girl looked around defensively, her lovely eyes flashing. "Because it isn't safe to talk in this town, Mr. Nekkut. Things get around. Nobody knows how. But the first thing you know, you get a Red X to your name. The next thing you know—well, you don't know it; you're dead!"

"Like my old man," Fritz said tightly. "He found out somethin'. I don't know what. But it's somethin' to do with this barber shop."

"How do you know?"

"Because there's somethin' about this place! It gets creepier every day."

"This creepy feelin' you get in the barber shop," the Gun-cat threw out, "can you detail it some?"

Judie Lane answered. Her eyes had held steadily on the Gun-cat ever since the conference had started. "It's this way," she said quickly. "It's as though there were unseen strings in town, unseen strings of

Judie was in his arms, but Charlie Bodman wondered if sheer terror was the cause.

evil. And they all radiate, somehow, from the barber shop—"

The Gun-cat smiled faintly. "That ain't, now, quite as definite as I'd like, Miss Judie."

"This is definite!" Fritz Brown declared. "Take a look at those barber mugs."

The Gun-cat moved closer to Judie Lane and looked at the long, double row of mugs on the shelf at the side of the mirror. Each mug had a name or monogram, lettered in gold leaf, on the side.

Fritz moved to the other side of Judie Lane. "Each man that I shave regular has his own individual mug, of course, with his name on it," he explained. "I put the name on free. They like it and it's good for trade." His voice got a little strained. "Every one of my customers that's had the Red X put to his throat, there's first been a Rex X painted on the side of his shavin' mug!"

The Gun-cat looked interested. "I'm beginnin' to see what you meant when you told me the mugs were dynamite. I reckon, durin' the day most the whole town floats in and out of your shop?"

"That's right."

"So it could be most anybody that marks up your mugs?"

"Yeah. Anybody."

"But we think," Judie Lane broke in again, "that the Red X murders check back to four men—two of whom you've just killed!"

"Claw Cranberry and Duce Wen are the other two?"

"Yes."

"You think that, but you can't prove it. Is that it?"

"That's the whole trouble," Marshal Woody said. "Any hellishness that breaks out, folks naturally suspects them of bein' back of it. But, like I said, there's enough legal law in this town that nobody can go around killin' at random and unprovoked. In consequence, the killin's been done in secret. It was a mystery what it was all about at first. But the reason ain't far to find now."

THE Gun-cat had stepped over to the shelf where the gold-lettered barber mugs were set in two neat rows. He bent over the mugs, examining them.

"Couple you won't be usin' any more," he said to Fritz.

"Gem Voorhis and Murdo, yeah."

"No Red X on their mugs, you can bet," Old Herman chipped in.

"No," Marshal Elmer Woody grimly. "Thanks to the brimstone barber, their check-out was plumb uncalculated."

"You were sayin'," the Gun-cat reminded shortly, "that the reason for the Red X terror ain't far to find."

With no break in his wooden expression, the marshal nodded. "The idea behind it is right simple. The Red X gang wants to scare folks. Make 'em skin out, abandon their property or sell cheap."

"Why?"

"At first we wondered. Now we know. The Texas and Pacific railroad is buildin' this way. We knew the line would have to cut the Big Thunder hills at Cottonwood Crossin'. But now it develops they're set to put a freight division point smack in this town. Property here will skyrocket. Whoever owns the town will take plenty."

"And the Red X crowd figure to own it?"

"That's right."

"Then whoever's coinin' money when the railroad comes through will be the ones that's cuttin' throats now."

"Yeah, but by the time the rail-

road's here there won't be any of us left to do anything about it. We'll all be moved off or killed off, looks like."

"If Claw Cranberry and Duce Wen are all that's worryin' you," the Gun-cat said, "why don't you throw 'em in the calaboose?"

Elmer Woody made an impatient gesture with his hand. The Gun-cat was listening close to catch his answer, and he had to admit that he couldn't be sure if it was regret or triumph which put a hoarseness in the marshal's voice when he said, "For all I can prove, they're just rough boys, a little gun-spirited. Comes down to that, they could put as many gunners in the field as I could. More. Wen's got more men lazin' around and drawin' gun-smoke wages on his Bar B, than you could shake a stick at. In a real fight, the slaughter would be terrific."

The Gun-cat's eyes were hard. "So to keep the slaughter from bein' terrific, you just sit back and leave Duce Wen carve the throats of every honest man in town, one by one?"

Again Elmer Woody's eyes bulged from a rush of blood to his face. His hand half reached for his holstered gun in an action that seemed to be wholly uncalculated anger. Then he controlled himself. But his words were hot.

"How do you think we feel, livin' right here and seein' our friends of a lifetime killed, one after another? You're from outside and even you feel it. But how do you think we feel." The heat went out of his words. His shoulders slumped. "I know, I know. It looks bad. I've done the best I knew how. But this is a job, I reckon, for someone like Gun-cat Bodman."

For a moment the Gun-cat could have sworn that the marshal was looking at him with recognition in his eyes.

"Yeah," Fritz Brown said bleakly, "it's Charlie Bodman's kind of job."

Old Herman rumbled in his throat. "You leave Mr. . . . er Nekkut keep on like he's started, and we won't need the Gun-cat or anyone else. He's got two of them fellers. When he get's the other two I'm bettin' there won't be no more trouble."

"What do you think, marshal?" the Gun-cat whipped in. "When I've corralled the unholy four, you think that'll take care of all the Red Xin' around here?"

A hush clamped over the room. Everyone was staring at Marshal Elmer Woody. He glared. His wooden-Indian expression was melting away fast now. His thick lip trembled. But before he said anything, he turned suddenly, as though to get himself under control. He was standing close to the shelf with its double row of initialed barber mugs.

His hand reached out, aimlessly, it seemed, as a man's hand will when he is under stress of emotion. He picked up one of the mugs. But after he had it in his hand, he didn't look at it. It was his own initialed mug that he looked at instead. His mug was on the back row. It didn't show up until he had lifted the one in front. But then it showed up like a new barn on a prairie.

Across the gold lettering of his initials a Rex X was smeared!

CHAPTER VI

GUN MAGIC

MARSHAL WOODY swayed gently back and forth on his boot heels, still guarding his emotions. There was only one betraying movement. His hand lifted in an unconscious gesture to his throat.

The Gun-cat came close, saw the way things shaped up. He dropped his hand to the marshal's shoulder. "It's just possible," he said softly, "that I've been makin' the same mistake about you that you made about me at first."

Elmer Woody didn't seem to hear him. "The Red X," he muttered. "On me. Two days. That's all the time the others had. Then . . . their throats—"

"You're in good company, marshal," the Gun-cat reminded. "Old Herman's been tagged. So have I, too."

The marshal blinked. "You? You haven't been in town long enough."

"It was before I got here."

"But the unholy four, as Old Herman calls 'em, have been here in Cottonwood Crossin' all along. Then . . . then it must be like some of us have thought; they got outside help. But why would they brand you before you got here? Who are you, anyway? Nekkut . . . *neck cut!* A hell of a name for a barber! Who are you?"

"It's a fair question. No reason any longer holdin' out on you. Old Herman reached me at Gold Float and—"

"Charlie Bodman!"

"Charlie Gun-cat Bodman!" Fritz echoed.

"Yeah," admitted Charlie.

The dusty shop seemed suddenly charged with new hope. Old Herman's blinking eyes were moist. Judie Lane frankly cried a little in Fritz' arms.

The Gun-cat looked away. Somehow, it hurt him to see another man's arms around Judie Lane. A moment later, Fritz approached him almost timidly.

"Gun-cat," he said, "I'd be that proud to have your name on one of my mugs. It'd be a keep-sake I could keep"—he looked self-consciously at Judie—"*we* could keep, for our children. Be good advertisin' for the shop, too. I couldn't gold-leaf it right away, but I could write your name on with hair dye. How about it, huh?"

The Gun-cat smiled tightly. "Anything you say, Fritz. So you're goin' to get married, you and Judie?"

"Why, yeah, Gun-cat. We're practically married now. Hey, look, I got an idea. You stay around here long enough to be best man at our weddin'. How about it, Gun-cat? Will you?"

Charlie Bodman shied away. "I'm not so handy at that kind of thing."

"Yeah, but listen, it would mean a lot to us." Fritz reached out for Judie's hand. "Wouldn't it, Judie?"

The girl's face was flushed. "Oh, Fritz, stop," she said. "This isn't the time to discuss our wedding."

The Gun-cat looked away, sighed to himself. Women could bust a man up worse inside than bullets. If he could ever get this woman question settled. Maybe that was why he roamed; maybe he was looking for the right girl all the time. And maybe now he'd found her. But somebody else had found her first.

WHILE they were holding their war parley in the shop, life flowed on in the single street of Cottonwood Crossing. Except for the gun-shattered barber-shop window and the fresh bloodstains on the floor, and on the plank sidewalk just outside, there was nothing to show that the town was under a death pall.

The sun beat down. Range horses came and went, hoofing dust in the street. Once in a while a buckboard clattered by with a clank of chain

traces and a rattle of wheel hubs. Boot heels on the sidewalk kept sending echoes rattling between the false-fronted buildings.

Before long a group of cowboys, hot and sweaty, in from the range, stopped at the rack outside.

One of them hollered in, "How about some barberin'?"

Fritz Brown looked at the Gun-cat. The Gun-cat shrugged. "You're in business to make a livin'. Wave 'em in. I'll take one chair myself."

"You know barberin', sure enough?"

The Gun-cat shrugged. "Shaved myself all my life. Never liked the idea of layin' out under another fella's razor. These boys don't look like they're so particular. I'll make out. And it'll give me an alibi for stickin' around the shop."

"Watch the play with these boys comin' in," the marshal warned, out of the corner of his mouth. "They're all from Duce Wen's spread. My guess is, they figger to wreck the joint and maybe provoke us into a shootin' match." Louder, he advised, "You better run along, Judie."

"All right," she agreed.

But before she left, she came to the Gun-cat. "I want to see you afterward," she murmured.

"Yeah?" the Gun-cat said under his breath, "I'll be waitin'."

"What's that?"

He grinned. "I said, it's a good idea."

"I want to see you"—she jerked her head toward Marshal Elmer Woody—"about him." She turned hastily, waved to Fritz. "Don't forget," she whispered to the Gun-cat as she sped through the door.

While two of the Bar B boys flopped into the barber chairs, the rest ranged the small shop, their boots making ominous thumps. A hornet had flown in through the shattered window and the boys tipped over a few chairs, and roughhoused about, pretending to swat it.

"Make mine a shave," the cowboy in Fritz Brown's chair barked.

"Put plenty of flower water on him to cut the horse smell," one of his companions advised.

These boys weren't regular customers. They didn't have name mugs. So Fritz started working up the lather in the mug which had belonged to Gem Voorhis.

The man in the chair sat up straight. "I don't want a shave out of no dead man's mug," he said angrily. His hand snatched out. He grabbed the mug, heaved it through the window.

The Gun-cat's customer was acting up, too.

"You got soap in my eye," he bawled. "Do it again, you gun-fisted barber, and I'll give you a funeral!"

The Gun-cat's lips tightened, and he made a pass with the wet shaving brush at the hornet which was buzzing around the mirror. He got it.

"Maybe this'll make you forget the soap in your eye," he said, and with the hornet struggling in the lather, he socked the brush to the cowboy's jaw.

The hornet let go, and so did the cowboy. Yowling, he jumped a foot off the chair. The others took it for a signal. They yowled, too, and started in full tilt to wreck the place.

One picked up the chair he had been sitting on and threw it into the mirror. Broken glass showered around. Another scooped up an armful of shaving mugs and broke them against the floor, hurling them one after the other. The fourth mug broke before it hit the floor. Before it even left his hand.

It was shot to pieces by a slug from Charlie Bodman's gun.

The close gun roar had a sobering effect on the cowpunchers. When they saw the Gun-cat in his lethal crouch, caught the expression on his face, green eyes slitted, lips thinned to parchment against his teeth, they let up long enough to listen to him talk.

"You've been showin' me. Now I'll show you boys somethin'. I got an idea you're all right on your home range. You're only wreckin' this place on orders from Duce Wen. I don't want to have to kill anybody else, and if you take a lesson from what I'm gonna show you, I won't have to." His gun waved out. "You, there, with the mugs in your hand, set one of 'em on the corner of the shelf with the handle stickin' outward. That's—"

A gun blazed from out in the street. The bullet entered the shattered barber-shop window, sucked wide past the staring men, and drove into the back wall. There didn't seem to have been any purpose to the shot. Then the cowboy nearest to the mug put his finger out and rubbed it around on the inside of the handle where a little of the glaze finish had been chipped.

He blinked in disbelief. "The slug went smash through the finger-hole without breakin' the cup or the handle!"

HE and everyone else, looked toward the street. A little man stood there with smoking six-gun. He appeared to be a colorless, ineffectual hombre—until you took a second glance at him.

His face held no expression at all! It might have been molded in mahogany. Marshal Elmer Woody was something of a wooden Indian, but alongside this man the lawman was a facial contortionist. It was the eyes, perhaps more than anything else, that stamped this man. Flat, pale, cold—killer's eyes.

"Duce Wen!" Old Herman's stricken voice sounded.

Siding Duce Wen was Claw Cranberry. The old owl-hooter's evil face was alight with enough malevolence to more than make up for the blankness on the face of his chief. Attracted by the gunfire, sensing pay-off drama, men popped heads out of doors up and down the street. But with Duce Wen on the prod, nobody came close.

"Did I steal your thunder, barber?" Duce Wen's voice was as cold and merciless as his face. He holstered his gun. "The show-off was by way of lettin' you know you got competition."

"You call that competition?" the Gun-cat purred. His half-closed eyes were showing that dangerous green again. He jerked his head at Fritz Brown. "Take a dozen mugs. Line 'em up on the edge of the shelf to match the one that's already there, handles out."

While Fritz arranged the cups, the Gun-cat, followed by the Bar B hard-cases and the watchful town marshal, strode outside and took his place near Duce Wen in the street. He stood for a moment eying the line of mugs.

"Now," he told the Black Buffalo boss, "I'll show you what I started to do at first—before you bought in with your amateur exhibition." He lined his gun.

"Wait a minute," Duce Wen jerked. "You mean you're gonna drive your lead through all thirteen of them handle holes and not chip the glaze?"

"You called it."

"We ain't that dumb! There won't be the insides of any handles chipped, on account your bullet

won't come anywhere near the mugs."

The Gun-cat called to Fritz in the barber shop: "Tear a piece of paper, wet it, and stick it over the hole on the last handle in the row."

He looked at Duce Wen. "To break the paper, the bullet's got to go through all the handle holes. Right?"

"Right. And there ain't a man four directions from Dodge, can do it."

"There's one."

"I'll lay you money an' any pay for the wreckage here, besides."

"That's charged to you, anyway," the Gun-cat said bleakly. "And as for bettin' on it, there's already more'n money at stake on this shot. There's lives, and the ownership of a town. Watch close."

While they watched, skeptically, but impressed by this brimstone barber who was more at home with a gun than a razor, he lined swiftly and squeezed trigger.

His shot was true. It negotiated the handle holes of the thirteen barber mugs and spanged into the back wall. The gun echoes crashed flatly between the false-fronted buildings, and wafted away to awed silence.

"There's only one man I know about, that can shoot like that," Duce Wen said slowly.

"I'm him," the Gun-cat admitted. He holstered his gun, pulled his tobacco bag from his shirt pocket, and started sifting tobacco into a cigarette paper.

CHAPTER VII

BULLETS AND BARBER POLES

GUN-CAT BODMAN! The name tremored on the lips of every man there. Up and down the street the news circulated, that Fritz Brown's new barber was no other than the famous frontier marshal, town-taming Charlie Bodman. Charlie, the Gun-cat. The man with nine lives—and death for six in his gun hand.

They couldn't believe it at first. Old Herman and Holt Clay had gone out looking for him. Holt Clay had been murdered and Old Herman had dragged dispiritedly back—alone. And now the Gun-cat was here? At the last, they had to believe it because their eyes had seen. Even Duce Wen believed, but he didn't want to, and so he was slow to admit it.

"The hell you preach!" he snarled, and in his pale, flat eyes a little life flickered. It wasn't wholesome life. It was something akin to the fixed glitter in the eyes of a coral snake. He moved a step to mutter something to Claw Cranberry.

From the shadows at the back of the barber shop sounded the cackling laugh of Old Herman Clegg.

"Gun-cat Bodman, yes siree. Two down and two more ready to fall."

Marshal Woody turned and shook the sweep-out man roughly. "Shut up, you old fool. Fuse is burnin' down on enough dynamite, already."

But Old Herman's taunt got a reaction from outside the shop, too.

"You old broom-sweep buzzard," Duce Wen slashed. "You're the one that's brung on all this. Pattin' yourself on the back now, ain't you? Figger you got everything your way. I'll get you, you cacklin' coyote, if it's the last slug I shoot on earth."

His hand made a wide flourish. He crouched, slapping hand for leather.

He wasn't the only one who moved.

Claw Cranberry was reaching, too. But not so obviously. Without any flourishes. Without even drawing attention to himself by crouching.

It was a mere wrist movement which sprang his gun from holster and swiveled it from his hip to blast Charlie Bodman.

Only one man in the crowd caught the sneak draw—Charlie Bodman. He even anticipated it.

Duce Wen's draw had been the give-away. On the face of things, it had been a natural enough action. But that was only on the face of things. Even the Gun-cat knew it wasn't in character for Duce Wen to get so emotional, to call his shot in an angry burst of words, to make that exaggerated hand flourish and crouch.

The Gun-cat surmised shrewdly, that the Black Buffalo boss was putting on the act to gather attention to himself in order to let Claw Cranberry make his draw unnoticed. And so the Gun-cat was ready.

Claw Cranberry was so intent on his own sneak move that he had no awareness of the Gun-cat's counter action. He was taken completely off guard by what happened.

It wasn't a shot. The Gun-cat was still hopeful of handling things without more killing. A man takes an awesome responsibility upon himself when he separates a living human creature from the earth, and the Gun-cat was more aware of this than most men.

What he did, was anticipate the owl-hooter's draw, and shade him a fraction of a second with his own. And it was the same kind of draw, all forearm and wrist movement, which escaped general observation. But when Claw Cranberry's gun muzzle swiveled outward to blast, it stopped just short of its fatal arc because Charlie Bodman's gun barrel had whacked against his knuckles.

Claw Cranberry yapped in pain and surprise. But the way things turned out, even the Gun-cat was surprised.

It was a glancing blow to Cranberry's knuckles; then the guns met, steel against steel. The harsh clang of their striking sounded clear above the roar of the involuntary shot which was jerked from Cranberry's weapon.

It was a dirt-gouging shot, harmless. To that extent, the Gun-cat's strategy had been successful. But though he had diverted the murderous bullet from himself, in another respect things didn't go quite on schedule.

The force behind the meeting gun barrels was terrific. Charlie had foreseen that, of course. What he couldn't have gauged was the precise way in which the guns, under muscular tension, raked against each other. The trigger guard of Charlie Bodman's gun caught against Claw Cranberry's in such a way that numbing leverage was applied against Charlie's fingers and the gun was sprung from his hand.

EVEN the men clustered against the store fronts could see what had happened. Everybody saw the gun fall; and with its falling, the hearts went out of those men of Cottonwood Crossing who were under the Rex X terror. For though in the West a tradition of nine-life invincibility had been built up about Charlie Bodman, the tradition was wreathed in gun smoke. The Gun-cat without a .45 in his fist was just another good man. And a good man with empty hands wasn't enough to meet Claw Cranberry and Duce Wen, and they gunning.

That was the despairing thought. To Duce Wen, Claw Cranberry, and the Bar B huskies, it was, of course, an exultant thought.

But Charlie Bodman's fist crashed

through to Claw Cranberry's jaw quicker than Claw could swing his gun into action. The smack of that knuckled blow against flesh-padded bone muddled the calculations all around.

Claw Cranberry heeled back against Duce Wen and flopped like a dead man in the street, the dust plopping up all around him. Duce Wen, his balance momentarily upset by the collision, squared around again, his gun swerving viciously to cut the town-tamer down.

But Charlie wasn't waiting for the lead slug. He was stepping in, swinging his long left arm as he came. Fist against gun lead.

The gun lead was faster.

But it would have been better for Duce Wen if it had been slower. He had let his quick panic rule his trigger finger. He had shot a split-wink too soon. His bullet grazed a burning path along the Gun-cat's ribs. But that wasn't a hindrance to the Gun-cat's fist. And when it landed, it didn't graze. It hit Wen's jaw with the kind of levered force that tears muscle from bone. And Duce Wen sat down so hard the dust spurted around him like water from a geyser.

By this time the Bar B boys were trying the old squeeze play. From four sides they rammed in, ganging the Gun-cat, throwing so many fists they got in each other's way. For a while the fists were like bricks in the air. The Gun-cat took a lot of punishment in that first mass assault.

But he dished out more. Ducking and swerving to elude their holds, rolling with their punches when he could, and standing into them when he had to, his own fists pludded in like kicking hoofs.

But there were limits even to the Gun-cat's endurance. Charlie knew he could never slug this mob to a showdown. But he could slug to a break through! And that was what he did—rammed through their ranks, fists flying, like a runaway locomotive with the piston rods out in front.

A few six-gun bullets slammed after him. Not many. The Bar B hard cases were wary of shooting each other.

Seeing him in this tight, Cottonwood Crossing men suddenly woke up to the fact that here was a man fighting their battle, lone-handed. Almost to a man, from doorways all up and down the street, they left their shelters and came rushing to his aid. The marshal, Fritz Brown, and even Old Herman stepped on each other's heels to get to him from the barber shop.

But the Gun-cat was used to helping himself. Those who thought he was running from the fight, found they were wrong. He took about six fast steps and jolted to a stop in front of the barber-shop door. Bending, he wrapped stout arms around the head-high barber pole. With his muscles—chest, shoulders, arms, back, legs—all co-operating, he wrenched the pole from its base.

Balancing it in his two hands, he hefted it high, swinging to face the Bar B pack which tore down upon him. With prodigious force, he heaved the pole.

The red-and-white-striped juggernaut struck below the knees, mowing down the front rank with bludgeoning effect. The oncoming mob was tight-packed. Men behind tripped over the sprawled figures of the ones in front. Shouting, cursing, grunting, in the space of a good deep breath, they were piled three and four deep.

The Gun-cat didn't let it go at that. Neither Claw Cranberry nor Duce Wen were caught in the tangle. And both of them had shaken off the

The Gun-cat faced the mob alone, but the barber pole was a terrible weapon in his hands.

effects of the fist punch and come alive enough to be interested—and able—to finish him off with well-placed gun lead.

Quite alive to this danger, the Gun-cat leaped forward, following the flung weight of the barber pole as it left his hands. Both Duce Wen and Claw Cranberry blazed futile shots before the Gun-cat's tightly knit body was eclipsed in the mêlée of floundering Bar B gun hands.

Wen and Cranberry thought they had driven him to cover. Callous to the possible injury of their own men, they put in more shots, then with savage triumph came in close. It was a big mistake. They should have run the other way. The next second they realized it.

It wasn't shelter that town-tamer Charlie Bodman had sought among the tangled bodies. It was a gun. Snatching a six-shooter from the holster of the first writhing cowboy who rolled under his hand, he came up shooting.

Two quick shots. But even now he didn't shoot to kill. Close overhead the bullets snarled their warning, and Duce Wen, reading death in the Gun-cat's next trigger squeeze, shoved both hands high.

"I'm in the air!" he bawled.

"Me, too!" shouted Claw Cranberry.

The others followed suit. The Bar B gun hands were only fighting for wages, and if the boss said the working shift was over, it was all right with them—particularly now that the identity of the boomer barber was no longer anyone's guess. That catlike crouch, and in the slitted eyes the green fire blazing, left them no doubts. It was Gun-cat Bodman, all right.

Tom Taylor, proprietor of the Post Office Emporium, called awed attention to the fact that the Gun-cat still had a cigarette clamped between his lips. What there was of it. Somebody's bullet had sliced it off almost flush with his mouth.

CHARLIE spit out the unraveling stub, and made a speech. He didn't have to raise his voice. The show he had put on secured him all the attention there was in town.

"I'm a peaceful man," he declared. "If there's one thing I hate with a gnawin' ingrown hate, it's havin' to kill somebody. But every once in a while a man springs up who thinks he's got a right to play the devil on earth. I come here to kill four men like that. I came in this morning and the sun's a little past the middle sky now, and I've killed two. The other two are Duce Wen and Claw Cranberry. I've changed my mind about killin' them. I'll leave the law do it." The Gun-cat flicked a glance at Marshal Elmer Woody. "There they stand, marshal, and the bloodshed ain't been even a little bit terrific. They're yours. Lock 'em up."

The marshal didn't answer. Not then. Not till Moonface Jackson told him to. Moonface ramrodded the Bar B for Duce Wen, and he was standing now directly behind Marshal Woody.

"Tell him, Woody," Jackson urged. "Tell this rampagin' Gun-cat why you ain't gonna lock no one up."

So Marshal Woody told him. With his stubborn face beet-red again, and the eyes popping, he said, "Moonface has got a gun in my back."

"Tell him the rest of it, Woody."

"This man'll shoot, Gun-cat," the marshal said. "Watch your moves for the next minute or two, or the slaughter—"

"Yeah, I know," the Gun-cat broke in. "It'll be terrific."

No one said anything then and the seconds stretched to tortured eternities as the deadlock held, with Bodman keeping the Black Buffalo-Bar B combination under his gun, and Moonface Jackson keeping his drop on the marshal.

Finally the Gun-cat drawled, "Like a poker game, ain't it? Along about three, four o'clock in the mornin' with everyone gray-faced and solemn. All right, Duce," he said, "I ain't payin' to look at your man's cards. I know he's got 'em. Go ahead. Fork your broncs and ride."

"The marshal comes with us," said Duce Wen.

"Sure," the Gun-cat agreed. "You won him on the deal. But I'm reservin' rights to buy him back. And he better be in the same condition as when received."

Cold triumph glinted in Duce Wen's pale, flat eyes. "That all depends on the marshal. If he plays along with us, maybe he won't get hurt."

"Start backin' away, marshal," Moonface Jackson ordered.

With that wooden Indian expression on his stubborn face, the marshal obeyed. Moonface Jackson kept the gun in his back, as they

walked toward their horses, and the Gun-cat let them go.

With the thunder roll of galloping hoofs wafting back, a sharp murmur of discontent rose on the air from watching Cottonwood Crossing men. Old Herman Clegg pushed in close and voiced the feelings of them all.

"You had 'em under your guns," he said hoarsely. "The last two of the unholy four! And you let 'em get away." His shaggy head wagged dolefully and his little round eyes were feverishly bright. He looked like a gaunt, unkempt sheep dog. "The same as you let the murderer get away in the hotel room back in Gold Float! Why, Gun-cat? Why?"

"You heard what Marshal Woody said," the Gun-cat replied calmly. "He called the turn. The slaughter would have been terrific. Everyone on both sides was nerve-pitched for a kill." He shifted his glance to include all the anxiously watching men. "Cleanin' up a town that's got out of hand is a little like fightin' a war. A good general knows when to pull in his neck and wait till the time's right for the attack."

"Won't be any of us left if we wait much longer," someone grumbled.

"We won't wait much longer," the Gun-cat said sharply. He holstered his gun and walked toward the barber shop.

CHAPTER VIII

RED X POST OFFICE

INSIDE the shop Fritz Brown was already busy cleaning up the wreckage. Old Herman joined him with his push broom. After a while he dropped the broom and commenced straightening the mugs on the shelf. He fussed over them like a housewife arranging her pantry dishes.

He looked up and caught the Gun-cat's watchful gaze on him. "The boys get used to lookin' fer their gold-lettered mugs in one certain place," he explained. "They raise a row if anyone mixes 'em up."

The Gun-cat nodded. "Same in barber shops every place, I reckon."

Old Herman and Fritz went on straightening, and the Gun-cat kept watching. And then Judie Lane came.

Fritz Brown looked up and saw her in the doorway. "Judie!" he exclaimed in pleased surprise. He started toward her.

She drew back. "I have to see the Gun . . . Mr. Bodman," she said.

"Sure. There he is."

She slipped past him into the room. "I have to see him alone, Fritz."

"Huh?" Fritz said doubtfully. "How you mean?"

"Something about this Red X business. It's important."

"You can go in the back room, I reckon," Fritz said, not too happy about it. He looked at the Gun-cat. "Judie wants to see you in back."

Alone with the girl, the Gun-cat was aware of that excitement stirring his blood again. It would have seemed the most natural thing in the world to take her in his arms. But all he did was look at her with a faintly amused light in his eyes.

She ignored the expression and said simply, "There's something I have to talk to you about."

"Yes?" he questioned. "It was something about Marshal Woody, wasn't it?"

There was a stark look of fear in her eyes. "Yes, Mr. . . . Mr. Bodman, there was something about Marshal Woody."

"Well?"

"I don't trust him."

"Why not?"

"Do I have to have a reason," she challenged. "I simply don't, that's all. The way he's handled things around here . . . he says it's to prevent needless slaughter, but if you want to know my opinion, I think he's fronting for Duce Wen. And I'm not the only one who thinks it."

"Who else thinks it, Judie?"

"You, for one!"

"I'm listenin'," the Gun-cat told her.

"You know when he found the Red X on his own barber mug?"

The Gun-cat nodded.

"Well, I . . . I guess I must have been watching you closer than anyone else. I saw you put the Red X on Elmer Woody's mug yourself."

The Gun-cat smiled, and from his pocket he took the tiny glass phial of red ink which he had discovered in the murder room at the hotel in Gold Float. He fingered it for a moment, then shoved it back in his pocket.

"You've got sharp eyes, Judie," he complimented.

"Then it's true, isn't it? You don't trust him."

"I had him under observation, that was all. I put the Red X on his mug. Figured I might learn something about him for sure, by watching his reaction when he discovered the Red X brand."

"And did you?"

"Let me ask you one, Judie. You're one around here that I can trust for sure—"

"How do you know you can trust me," the girl interrupted, almost hysterically. "How can a person know whom to trust, with all this terrible killing—"

THE Gun-cat never could explain how it happened. But suddenly she was in his arms, crying for all she was worth. And he was comforting her as he would have a frightened child. Only she wasn't a child; she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen—and she was going to marry another man.

A moment later she was wiping her eyes and smiling up at him. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bodman," she said. "My nerves aren't so good I guess. I've been trying not to worry—but . . . well, you know about Gem Voorhis and—"

"But Gem Voorhis can't bother you any more, Judie."

"But he can. I mean . . . nothing's changed. You see, Gem Voorhis was only acting for Duce Wen. Duce is the one who's been annoying me and making threats. I haven't said anything to Fritz about it. Fritz is so . . . so grand, and I love him, but he isn't a gun fighter. And if I told him, he'd just go butting his head into one of Duce Wen's bullets—or get a Red X on his throat!"

The Gun-cat nodded slowly. "Like that, huh?"

"Like that," she said. "But I feel better, now that I've told you."

"Tell me something else, Judie. Does this make any sense to you?"

From his pocket he fished a tiny piece of crumpled paper. He smoothed it out, put it in her hand. There was pencil writing on it.

She read it aloud slowly:

"This afternoon you know who from you know where to Running Wolf. Send M P X."

Judie looked up at the Gun-cat, utter bewilderment on her pretty face.

"It feels so smooth and slick," she said.

"It should. I found it wedged in between the soap and the side of a shaving mug."

"Whose mug?"

"Bar B rider they call George. Little bandy-legged feller—"

"I know who you mean. He's one of Duce Wen's gun hands."

"He came in the shop this mornin' and went prowlin' around. Reached out to straighten his mug on the shelf and stuck this note inside, I reckon. Anyhow, I fished it out right after. Think hard, Judie. Is there a cow outfit around here called the M P X? Is there anybody or anything called Runnin' Wolf?"

"Yes," Judie said excitedly. "There's a canyon. Running Wolf canyon. It cuts the north side of Duce Wen's spread. But no M X P brand that I ever heard of."

"That's a starter, anyhow, Judie."

"And you found that note in a barber mug! Then they've been doing more than paint Red X warnings on the mugs. They've been using the barber shop as a kind of post office, is that it? To pass on information and instructions to each other when it wasn't handy to meet face to face?"

"That's the size of it, Judie. You weren't so far off, were you, when you talked about the unseen strings of evil which seemed to radiate from the barber shop? Now then, who did you mean when you said, 'they'?"

"Why, Duce Wen and Claw Cranberry and . . . and whoever they're working with. It could be anybody. The whole town circulates through the barber shop. Marshal Woody spends half his time there!"

"Still on the warpath about the marshal, are you?"

"I guess so," she admitted. "But I'm so worried and scared!"

"I know," he said quickly. "But you go home now, and stop worrying. We're going to get to the bottom of his Red X business right soon."

CHAPTER IX

"BLOOD EVERYWHERE"

BACK in the barber shop the Gun-cat tried to keep his mind on problems revolving around the Red X terror. Here was a whole town living under the threat of instant horrible death. But the most dominant thing in the Gun-cat's mind was Judie Lane!

He sighed. Life was a curious proposition, and sometimes it was pretty loco—especially when a girl's lovely face kept drifting across a man's consciousness.

The Gun-cat swore softly. Women were the devil. Worse than either gold or lead when it came to mixing a man's life up.

Fritz Brown had a customer in the chair. But between every few snips of the scissors he kept looking around at the Gun-cat, his young face troubled, questioning. He was wondering what had gone on in the back room, and he hadn't quite primed himself to the point of asking.

He finished with his customer and turned to Old Herman. "Watch the place for a minute or two. I'll be right back."

He slipped out the door without saying anything to the Gun-cat and hurried down the street.

Old Herman nodded his head, a reminiscent expression on his wrinkled face. "Love when you are young! It is something, hah? Fritz goes to Judie. Every day it is like this. If he lost her, I think he would go crazy in the head."

"I reckon," the Gun-cat said shortly. To start his mind on a different track, he threw out, "Anybody running an M P X brand around here?"

"M P X?" Old Herman leaned on his broom and considered. "Nope. Never heard of it."

"What do you make of this?" The Gun-cat handed him the piece of paper he had taken from the barber mug.

Old Herman read. His stringy hands trembled and his breath came fast. "Man, this is something big!" he said. "Where did you get it?"

The Gun-cat told him.

Then Old Herman made an observation similar to Judie's. "They've been usin' our shop for their post office. Right under our nose. I told you there was something evil about this shop."

"Yeah," the Gun-cat said. "What's the note mean to you? Anything?"

"M P X," Old Herman muttered. "The way it's worded, sounds like a man's initials. *To Running Wolf send M P X.* Sounds like the feller who left the note here is instructin' someone to send M P X to Runnin' Wolf Canyon. The Bar B's got a line shack there." Old Herman's hungry glance ranged over the row of initialed barber mugs. There was one mug set back from the others. It wouldn't be used any more. The initials on the outside were M. P.

"Murdo Pasquele!" Old Herman blurted. His hands trembled so that he could scarcely hold the paper.

"I get it," the Gun-cat said quickly. "The M P could be for Murdo Pasquele. And the X, that's just the throat-cut sign for the terror gang."

Old Herman nodded violently. "But whoever was supposed to get this note can't send Murdo Pasquele, because you killed him!"

"What do you make of the rest of it? '*This afternoon you know who from you know where.*'"

Old Herman turned his hands up hopelessly.

BUT the answer came unexpectedly from outside. There was a sound of a man running fast on the board sidewalk and Fritz Brown came stumbling in, so winded he could hardly stand. He couldn't talk. He tried to. Between wrenching breaths.

"Judie!" he got out. That much was plain. The rest was garbled.

The Gun-cat was holding him up. "Take it easy, kid," he said. "Get your breath."

Fritz, stark agony on his face, tried again. "Judie . . . blood everywhere . . . gone!"

The Gun-cat's own face whitened. "Come again, kid."

"I went to Judie . . . her house. She went right home from here, like I told her to. I thought it was too dangerous for her in the streets. I told her to go home. And she did. And now she's dead!"

The Gun-cat shook him. His voice was hoarse. "How do you know?"

"I found this," Fritz groaned. He opened his clenched hand. A shred of gingham, the same gay summer print that Judie had worn in the shop less than an hour ago, swelled in his hand as the pressure of his clenched fingers was removed from the cloth.

The Gun-cat took it between his own fingers. There was blood on the gingham; fresh blood, but already turning black, stiffening the cloth.

"Blood smeared all over the room!" Fritz gasped. "And Judie gone!"

"Then we'll find her," the Gun-cat said fiercely. "Come on back to the house."

By this time the news was circulating. Most of the town trailed with them as they hurried to the house. There wasn't much new to learn. Furniture was overturned.

And there was blood everywhere, as Fritz had reported. Judie's father, for whom she kept house, was out of town, so the girl had been alone.

Behind an inner door the Gun-cat discovered several ground-out cigarette butts. It was evident that Judie's assailants had waited there for her return from the shop. There had been a fearful struggle—and now Judie was gone.

In the back yard, behind a screen of feathery salt-cedar, were hoof-marks showing where two horses had waited. The hoof marks led directly into the chaparral behind the house. But within a hundred yards they were lost on hard rock.

The Gun-cat blamed himself, bitterly. He hadn't taken Judie seriously enough when she told him about her fears concerning Duce Wen. The Black Buffalo boss had tried this morning, through Gem Voorhis, to take the girl. He had tried again this afternoon, and had succeeded. This afternoon—

The Gun-cat's fingers tightened on the wad of paper in his pocket, the paper on which was written, "*This afternoon you know who from you know where—*"

You know who . . . Judie Lane! *You know where* . . . right here, her house!

Duce Wen had gone through with his plan, in spite of the fact that Murdo Pasquele wasn't alive to help him out with it.

The Gun-cat faced the muttering, pressing men of Cottonwood Crossing. "Go on home," he told them, starkly. "I know where they've taken the girl. Too many on the hunt would be dangerous for her. It's a job for me, alone."

Gun-cat Bodman's words carried weight. Men started scattering. But with Fritz Brown, the Gun-cat's words didn't weigh a feather's worth.

He came in close to the Gun-cat, his face ghastly. "I'm goin' with you," he said. "And if you don't like it you can gun me down."

The Gun-cat looked at him briefly. He jerked his head. "Let's ride."

"Where to?"

"Bar B line shack in Runnin' Wolf Canyon."

THEY went back to the shop, the Gun-cat outwardly calm, Fritz Brown like a walking ghost.

"Watch out for things here, Old Herman," the Gun-cat said. "We're goin' on a trip."

Fritz Brown didn't say anything. He was like a man out of the world. His eyes were dead, and his face had the gray puttylike appearance of Old Herman's. Grief had done this to him. He went straight to the towel cabinet, pulled the door off its hinges with a single wrench of his hand, kicked the clean towels out onto the floor, and grabbed up a gun belt and holstered six-shooter from the back.

Riding along, he was like a wild man. The Gun-cat had to keep admonishing him to slow down.

"You'll ride your horse into the ground before we're half way there," he warned him several times.

Finally, the Gun-cat pushed his horse ahead and across the path of Fritz' animal, forcing Fritz to slow down. This time he crowded him so close, hemming him against a *malpais* ledge, that Fritz was forced to stop.

He turned on the Gun-cat, his dulled eyes coming alive in a blaze of furious anger.

"Are you for me or against me?" he slashed. "Way you're holdin' me up, I'm thinkin' you've sold out to the Red X!"

"You're talkin' wild, Fritz. You know better'n that."

"I don't know anything! All I

know's I love Judie. Without her I don't care if I live or die. I love her! Can you understand that? Or has gun smoke so plumb seeped through your brain, you ain't human?"

The Gun-cat's eyes flashed. "You're talkin' wild, Fritz, like I said. Snap out of it and do some thinkin'. Gun-fightin's my business and I'm seein' you through this, right to the end." His lips tightened. "For your private information, I'm still human and I think a heap of Judie Lane, too. Now let's get to workin' together, you and me—for Judie."

Fritz was staring. "You *love* her," he said, reading meaning into the Gun-cat's words. "But you've known her for a day. I've known her all my life—so how much do you think she means to me?"

It was the same kind of reasoning Marshal Elmer Woody had given him, the Gun-cat remembered, talking about his concern for the folks of Cottonwood Crossing stalked by the Red X terror.

Fritz had to be quieted down, if Judie was to be helped. So the Gun-cat tried shifting the talk.

"What do you think about Marshal Woody?" he asked. "Judie was tellin' me she thinks he's tied in with the Red X bunch."

"I don't think anything about Woody," Fritz said doggedly. "I don't think about anything except my—"

"Except Judie. Yeah, you told me before." The Gun-cat's voice hardened. "But you want to help her, don't you? You want her to live? All right, then start plannin' how you're goin' to do it. We're right liable to run into Marshal Woody. We've got to know whether to treat him as friend or enemy. It's just possible Judie's life depends on it. Now what do you think of Marshal Woody?"

SOME of the desperate urgency of the Gun-cat's tone got through to Fritz. "I dunno, Gun-cat," he said. "We've talked about him, me and Judie. Sometimes I think one way and sometimes another. He's such a wooden Indian. I dunno."

"That's a big help. All right, how about this? Do you know a short cut to the Runnin' Wolf line shack?"

"Yes," said Fritz. "Right ahead here, through Hennepin's Draw. Some of the worst of the Big Thunder rough country. But a man can make it if he's careful."

"We'll make it," the Gun-cat promised.

So they forged along. Through crumbling *malpais*, black honeycombed rock upthrust through ancient volcanic cracks, where a single wrong step could lame a horse or send horse and rider hurling to a mangled death at the bottom of the cat-walk trail. The *cholla* cactus with its billion silvered needles disputed their way. Prickly pear in green and purplish banks grew rank over the little used trail.

But they kept moving. And in the end they cut the main Running Wolf trail. The Gun-cat called a halt, stepped out of saddle and prowled around, looking for sign of their quarry. Fritz waited impatiently.

"See anything?" he kept asking.

The Gun-cat swung back into saddle. His face was bleak. "We're close onto 'em. The two that started out have been joined by two more. Four of 'em have passed this way. The tracks are plain. You could make 'em out yourself."

"And Judie?"

The Gun-cat jerked his head. "I think so. Can't tell for absolute. But one of the tracks appears to me

like the horse might be carryin' double."

They rode hard, rocketing along, with hoofbeats crashing in flat echoes against canyon rock. But only for a little while. Then the Gun-cat forced Fritz to slow down again.

"We'll be gettin' in close now. We want to be sure it's them that's surprised, not us."

Fritz fumed at the delay, but held his horse to the pace of the Gun-cat's. They were in chaparral country now, with the scrub oak crowding their stirrups and limiting their view to one short section at a time on the twisting trail. They were climbing, and after a while they came out on a height of land. They could look down upon tawny undulating hills where buffalo grass afforded good range. Bar B cattle appeared as rusty spots on the far slopes.

But Fritz called attention to something closer. "There it is!" he cried. His finger trembled when he pointed. "Runnin' Wolf line shack. Close, in that draw."

"Not so loud," the Gun-cat cautioned. He studied the layout. He could see men moving, but he couldn't identify them.

"We're wastin' time," Fritz blurted. "Come on." He put heels to his horse, r'ared around and started down the trail.

"Wait," the Gun-cat called sharply. He brought his own bronc up to the other man's. "We've got to hobble the horses and walk from here. They'd spot us in saddle."

"The hell you say!" Fritz flung at him. "I been takin' your orders all day." He started riding.

The Gun-cat held with him. "Don't be a damn fool, Fritz."

Fritz glared at him in defiance. "Judie's down there. Her life's in danger. That might not mean anything to you, but it does to me. Every minute counts. I'm ridin'. You can come along if you want, or stay here for all I care."

"I'll come along with you Fritz," the Gun-cat said. There was a peculiar quality to his tone. Fritz might have recognized it if he hadn't been beside himself with grief and worry. The Gun-cat's voice held an unnatural quietness. It was as though he had made a decision from which there was no turning back.

He pushed his horse through the chaparral until he was stirrup to stirrup with Fritz. He leaned close.

"Fritz, look here," he called.

Fritz looked around—and the Gun-cat let him have it. A short-armed punch to the point of the jaw. No harder than necessary.

Fritz slumped. His head lolled, his whole body sagged. With that same muscled arm which had directed the knockout blow, the Gun-cat cradled the young man to keep him in saddle. Then he brought the horses to a halt, eased Fritz down. He tied him there to a gnarled oak scrub, and hobbled both horses nearby.

Then under cover of the chaparral, the Gun-cat started downtrail at an Indian jog, a lean avenging wraith in the paling afternoon light.

CHAPTER X

THEN THERE WERE NONE

BY the time he had come within easy hailing distance of the line shack, the Gun-cat had perfected his strategy. There wasn't enough cover to make a surprise attack. What he did was come out of the bush and walk forward slowly, casually it seemed, arms in a lazy swing—and allow himself to be discovered.

A man near the door of the shack saw him first. He stared, mouth agape, his hand dropping involun-

tarily to his holstered six. But by that time his brain was working. He didn't draw. He just shouted hoarsely, "Come on out here, fellas."

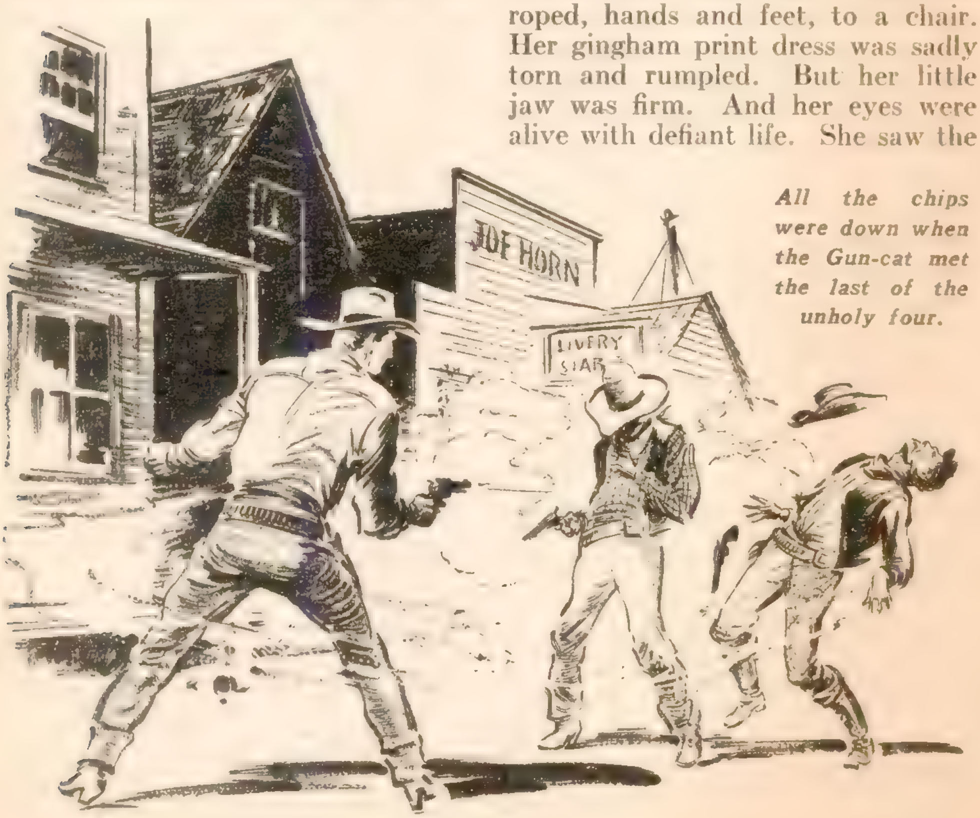
They came crowding out, three of them. They went through the same maneuvers as the first. They stared, their hands dropped to their guns—and then they remembered in time, that it was Gun-cat Bodman they faced, and they didn't separate their irons from leather. Not then.

The Gun-cat came on. He was grinning to himself, sardonically. Things were working to schedule so far. This wasn't the first time his gun-smoke reputation had saved him from the necessity of shooting. Men didn't draw against the Gun-cat any more. Not at even terms. They waited for at least a two-to-one advantage. It was four-to-one here, but the chances weren't as good as they looked to be. One of them might get the Gun-cat. But it wouldn't be the first one who drew. So each man waited for the other to draw—and while they waited, the Gun-cat moved in closer and closer.

He stopped. And still he made no move for his gun. But his slitted eyes were green. He recognized the men. Three of them were Bar B gunners who had been in the barber shop that morning. The fourth was Marshal Elmer Woody.

"Move away from the door," the Gun-cat directed.

No one seemed to question his authority to order them. They moved almost mechanically, stepping to each side of the door. The Gun-cat could see inside then. The slant rays of the afternoon sun lit up the shack. And there, plainly revealed, was Judie Lane. She was roped, hands and feet, to a chair. Her gingham print dress was sadly torn and rumpled. But her little jaw was firm. And her eyes were alive with defiant life. She saw the



All the chips were down when the Gun-cat met the last of the unholy four.

Gun-cat, of course. But she didn't say anything. Just looked at him with mute appeal.

OUT of his cat-eyes, Charlie Bodman studied the four men who stood there waiting, pumping up their nerve to a place where they could start gunning. The faces of the two at the left of the door were screwed up as though they had gone in head-first, to drag a jaguar from his hole. One of them had been bleeding from his nose. His shirt was drenched with dried and blackened blood.

So that was one worry off the Gun-cat's chest. The blood in the room back in Cottonwood Crossing hadn't been Judie's. From the looks of things, the girl had put up a hell-fire scrap before they had taken her.

On the right side of the door stood the other Bar B gunner and Marshal Woody. Both wore holstered guns. Even now, with the marshal showing as guilty as a hound dog caught with sheep blood on his jaws, he still didn't show any emotion. No shame, no defiance, no gloating. Just the same wooden Indian expression.

The tension between them all was drawing out to a fine, screaming thread. It was only a matter of seconds now till it would have to break. The Gun-cat had sized up the situation and he was mortally certain how it would shape. One of the two Bar B gunners at the left was the "George" who had dropped the note in the barber mug this morning. He was standing a little behind the other. And George was the one who would make the play, figuring to be protected by the body of the man in front of him when the Gun-cat started pouring out his return lead.

Unless George was a very fast gunner, the Gun-cat wasn't going to have much trouble with him. He was calmly confident that he could take both George and the man in front of him. The other two at the right of the door were something different. He might drop one. But he couldn't hope to play out his luck to the point of getting them both. Not without collecting some return lead. There were limits to any man's gun magic.

The Gun-cat smiled then. With Judie Lane's life and his own in the balance, he actually smiled, as though from awareness of some secret knowledge. Then his lips thinned out until they were only a straight white scar on his range-brown face, and the green fire blazed in his eyes.

He was into it then. In a fury of desperation, George lurched to cover himself more completely by the man in front, and at the same time he dug for his gun. The man ahead of him cursed, and dug, too.

So, also, did the Gun-cat. Thunder from all three guns shook the canyon. But only from one gun was there any lead lightning to accompany the thunder. The Bar B gunners drove their lightning into the ground. Trigger-jittered, they started firing as soon as they cleared leather, calculating on catching the Gun-cat in their bullet rake as their gun muzzles eared upward.

But there wasn't any "bullet rake." There was only a single shot from each Bar B gun. Then two shots from Charlie Bodman. That finished it so far as the two Bar B gunners were concerned. Charlie's shots connected.

But in this same life-and-death second, the other two gunners were active, also. Marshal Elmer Woody and the remaining Bar B hard case. One slug raked air so close past the Gun-cat's face that he could feel its

lethal breath. There was one more shot—from Marshal Woody. Then the fighting was over.

With the echoes of that shot still rattling close in the canyon the marshal said, looking at the Gun-cat, "That's one for me and two for you."

Charlie Bodman blew smoke from the muzzle of his gun, reloaded and holstered. "Nice goin', marshal," he commented.

Then he went in to Judie. For several seconds after he untied her she clung to him and cried. Cried as though she could never stop. The Gun-cat just held her, his own eyes moist and blinking, and told her to go on and cry as much as she wanted to, that she had a good spell of tears coming to her. Afterward, he gave her his handkerchief and she wiped her eyes.

Outside the shack, with the three dead men humped around them, like any three boulders, Marshal Elmer Woody horned gently into the play. "What I'd admire to know, Gun-cat, was how you knew you could trust me? I had everyone else fooled, from Duce Wen on down. They were plumb convinced I was poolin' my pile with theirs. You took a hell of a chance, son, shootin' it out with all four of us. If I'd been agin' you instead of for you, you'd never have come through. How'd you figger it out?"

"Wasn't so much of a problem. I been makin' a special study of you ever since I hit town. I even put the Red X on your barber mug to watch how you'd act. You come through it a hundred percent. I made up my mind you were regular way back, then. But if I'd had any doubt, Judie would have proved it to me just now. She didn't say anything when she saw me. So I knew you must have got to her with some words of hope. Otherwise she'd have looked more worried, and maybe shouted somethin' to warn me against you. Shall we shake, marshal?"

"I'd be that happy, son!"

ON the trail back to Cottonwood Crossing the Gun-cat made his peace with Fritz Brown. The young barber was almost deliriously happy as he rode along beside his sweetheart. The Red X had ceased to exist, as far as he was concerned.

But Charlie Bodman wasn't out from under the gun smoke. He'd started something here at Cottonwood Crossing and now he'd have to finish it.

Marshal Woody was the only one who sensed the Gun-cat's feelings.

"You've got a gun chore facin' you, son," he remarked. "I'll string along."

The Gun-cat shook his head. "I'd rather you wouldn't, Elmer. You sided me today and you saved my life. But mostly I'm a lone wolf. Ain't used to figgerin' my plays to fit in with a companion. I'd honest rather go it alone, Elmer."

The marshal nodded. "O. K., if that's the way you feel about it, Gun-cat. Comes down to that, the remainin' two of the unholy four hadn't ought to give you any more trouble than the first two. But"—over the wooden face swept an expression of acute sympathy. In the moonlight the Gun-cat could have sworn the marshal's stubborn jaw trembled—"take care of yourself, son. I . . . . I've come to like you a heap. It's a lonely life, gunnin' fer the law. Almost lonelier than gunnin' against it."

BACK in town, late at night, the four of them trooped into Fritz Brown's barber shop. From somewhere in back, Old Herman ma-

terialized, sleepily rubbing his eyes. He came awake fast enough when both Fritz and Judie started telling him what had happened.

The Gun-cat had eased himself into the front barber chair. "I feel tired," he said.

Old Herman pressed close. "Leave Fritz work you over," he urged solicitiously. "There's hot water. Some hot towels on the face, a shave, and mebbe a scalp rub—it freshens a man up a heap."

"Sure, Mr. Bodman," Fritz Brown said. He took a razor and started stropping it.

"I always shave myself," the Gun-cat called out in protest. "Never liked to have another man put a razor to my neck. Not that I mistrust you—but a earthquake might come along and joggle your elbow."

Fritz nodded. "All right. I'll lather you up and steam your face, and you can put the razor to it yourself."

"Fine," the Gun-cat said, and settled deeper in the chair.

Marshal Elmer Woody had been pacing nervously about the shop. Now he went to the windows and started pulling the blinds. "You pick a plumb outlandish time to get shaved," he grumbled.

The Gun-cat grinned faintly. "What's the matter, Elmer? Ain't you got law and order in your town?"

"Not enough to keep you from gettin' picked off from outside any time Claw Cranberry or Duce Wen wants to come by and start poppin' lead."

"It's moonlight. I could see 'em soon as they could see me."

"There all the same ain't no use invitin' disaster,"said the marshal.

He finished pulling the shades. But even after that, everyone in the shop, with the exception of Charlie Bodman, found himself casting quick, uneasy glances about. The menace which had lain so long over the little shop didn't seem to be banished with the closing of the door. It seemed to have been sealed in!

Outside somewhere, a rooster crowed, and two dogs started barking. Distantly. And from the Black Buffalo Saloon at the other end of town, sounds of drunken revelry wafted in.

Suddenly the Gun-cat, glancing sharply at Fritz, asked, "What's the matter?"

The barber's face seemed drained of blood. He was holding a mug in his hand and he had to raise his other hand to help him support it. Even then, with both hands pressing hard, they trembled.

"My mug?" the Gun-cat questioned.

Fritz's answer was a mute nod.

"The one you wrote my name on with hair dye?"

Again the nod.

"Let's see it."

Fritz opened his hands. Across the Gun-cat's name had been daubed a Red X!

They were all close and staring. They could hear Old Herman's breath suck in. "It's doom!" he moaned. "If they're still makin' Red Xes and the Gun-cat's got it, what hope is there for any of us?"

The Gun-cat alone showed no concern. He hadn't put the X on his own mug, but he might as well have, for all the worry it seemed to occasion him.

"I been Xed before," he said, "and I'm still healthy."

"Listen!" Judie's stricken voice sounded. "There's someone outside."

They listened. Plainly they could hear the dust-muffled tramp of

many men. Garbled voices pierced the night hush.

The Gun-cat leaned back in his chair and stretched. "Delegation from the Black Buffalo, I reckon. It's about time they found their way here."

"You've been expecting them?" Judie gasped.

"Sure," the Gun-cat said, "when they were drunk enough." His words were cut off by a flat challenging voice from close outside in the street.

"If Gun-cat Bodman's in there, leave him come out and fight like a man!"

A thin-lipped grin touched the Gun-cat's face. He eased from the chair, fingers brushing across his holster. "Reckon they mean me," he said.

"That's Duce Wen's voice," Marshal Woody declared.

The Gun-cat nodded.

"Claw Cranberry'll be sidin' him."

Again the Gun-cat nodded.

"If you go out there, you'll be buckin' 'em both."

"That's what I figured."

"I'll go with you."

The Gun-cat shook his head. "Remember what I told you, Elmer. I'm a lone-wolf gunner. There's those in this room that needs protectin'. You stay here."

"But—"

"There's enough law in your town that they can't shoot a man down before witnesses in his own doorway, can they?"

"They'll have to give you a chance at your gun," the sheriff admitted. "But—"

"That's all I want to know," said the Gun-cat. Without a farewell look at any of them, he opened the door and stepped outside.

IN the white spill of moonlight it looked as though the whole town had congregated in the street. Apparently the word had gone around that Duce Wen and Claw Cranberry were in the Black Buffalo bolstering up their courage with jolts of their own redeye.

Now here they were, the last of the unholy four, clamoring for a showdown. And here was Gun-cat Bodman.

The whole crowd sighted him, of course, the moment he stepped through the door. And in the rapidly widening space in the middle of the street he sighted Wen and Cranberry. Men were pushing back from this pair in all directions, giving them plenty of bullet room.

The Gun-cat didn't say anything. He merely stepped off the walk into the street, walking forward slowly, with his peculiar springy, almost feline gait.

Duce Wen and Claw Cranberry swapped quick meaning glances, and commenced their own march. However effective the whiskey might have been in building up their courage, it was having no effect on their legs. As steady as stumps they pushed forward, their hands brushing holsters, a stark, relentless rhythm to their pace.

"We're goin' to kill you, Gun-cat," Duce Wen said. His lips settled back against his teeth, his pale flat eyes glinting under the moon's cold light.

"Yeah," Claw Cranberry echoed. "Kill you."

Dust scuffed under the drag of their heels as they clumped along. The street was so still that the creak of their boot leather sounded clearly. Charlie Bodman was moving in, too, effortlessly it seemed, almost floating.

The tension lay so heavy over the

street that men were weighted in the dust. After the first wild, backward scramble, they had stood as though hypnotized, unable to move an inch to better their position against stray bullets.

Then suddenly the street came alive with saffron flame—and gun lead. Which man made the first break in that slow march toward death, the watchers were never afterward able to agree. Everything seemed to happen in the same doom-freighted second, as guns roared and lead drove in lethal criss-cross.

It was perhaps the fastest bit of gunplay Charlie Bodman had ever participated in. Certainly, Cottonwood Crossing had never seen anything to equal it, and the town was a hard-bitten, hoary one; dating from the days of Indians and buffalo hunters.

Guns bucked and lead snarled. Afterward there were awed spectators who asserted solemnly that Charlie Bodman had faced Claw Cranberry and Duce Wen, and shot their lead out of the air, bullet for bullet, as it left the muzzles of their guns.

To bear out this contention, Tom Taylor, proprietor of the Post Office Emporium, produced a chunk of lead which he had picked up from the dust, which certainly appeared to have been formed by the fusing of two bullets meeting in head-on collision.

"Shot their bullets out of the air like a man standin' back and poppin' birds," Tom asserted. "Then with his last two slugs he pops *them!*"

At least there wasn't any doubt about the last part of it.

With their over anxiously fired bullets riddling the air about him, the Gun-cat snapped one shot at Claw Cranberry and one at Duce Wen.

THOSE were the last shots fired. When the gun roar smoothed away, the two killers were slumped in the dust, dead on their feet before they fell. Dead from the same malady which had stricken Gem Voorhis and Murdo Pasquele. Dead from a lead-drilled hole in their foreheads, the lead in all four cases having penetrated the forehead, just above the bridge of the nose.

Then the Gun-cat made a speech. With smoke still wreathing his gun barrel, he looked over at the men crowded in the Black Buffalo doorway and spoke mildly. "I hate killin'. But I came here this mornin' to kill four men. I've killed 'em. I killed 'em because in a new land where there's elbow room for all, they robbed other men of the very air they breathed. I killed 'em so other men could live. Gem Voorhis, Claw Cranberry, Murdo Pasquele, and Duce Wen—may God do the best he can with their souls. Them and a few others that's throwed in for good measure in Runnin' Wolf Canyon."

He holstered his iron. Then he shook tobacco in a creased paper without spilling a grain. He rolled the cigarette in one hand, licked it, put flame to the twisted end, and drew in smoke.

"Just one more thing. You Bar B gents and anyone else that's been takin' Duce Wen's fightin' money, I'm warnin' you to walk easy. I don't think you were mixed up in the Red X murders or I wouldn't be stoppin' with a warnin'. But walk easy on account from now on, it ain't the Red X brand that's goin' to be a worry in Cottonwood Crossin'. It's the Red Dot brand. In other words, the epidemic of slashed throat has plumb been put under control by a process usin' the principle of expandin' gasses to inject lead into the skull. That's all, boys. Now,

if you'll excuse me, I'm steppin' inside the barber shop and finishin' with my shave."

CHAPTER XI

BARBER-SHOP SHOWDOWN

IN the shop again, the Gun-cat relaxed back in the chair. They crowded about him, everybody talking at once.

"You made it, son," the marshal said simply. "You made it."

Old Herman was pumping the Gun-cat's hand. "I'm an old man," he said huskily. "In my time I seen lots of shootin'. But none like today! They'll bless your name in this town, Charlie Bodman."

"They won't forget you brought me here at the risk of your life, Old Herman."

"It's some shootin', all right," Fritz Brown said. "We all owe you plenty, Mr. Bodman."

"Nobody owes me anything," the Gun-cat made empty talk.

As though sensing an undercurrent of hostility between the two, Old Herman broke in quickly, "Put the apron around Mr. Bodman and freshen him up."

"Sure," Fritz said.

While he worked up the lather, the Gun-cat took the cigarette from his mouth, allowing his hand to drop limply to his side. It came in contact with a dangling leather strap fastened to the chair. His fingers felt it idly. "What's that, some newfangled razor strop?"

"No," Fritz told him. "That was a kind of invention of my dad's. Drunks often come in and insist on gettin' barbered. But they won't stay still in the chair. This strap holds 'em still."

"How's it work?"

"Show him, Fritz," Old Herman urged.

Fritz stepped close, pulled the strap across the Gun-cat's lap, and with one tug of his hand, fastened it securely.

Old Herman looked on in admiration. "Ain't she a daisy? Catches 'em right at the bend of their elbows, see? Fastens behind, where they can't reach it. They can't grab for the razor and they can't get out of the chair. That strap would hold a kickin' horse. I always told old man Brown, he ought to get a patent on it."

"Uncommon slick," the Gun-cat admitted.

Fritz unfastened the strap. The Gun-cat allowed it to lie across his lap, examining it with casual interest while Fritz went about preparing for the shave.

After a moment the Gun-cat looked up at the marshal and said, "Elmer, do me a favor, will you? Them folks outside lookin' in through the door—move 'em along, will you? Makes it too hot to close the place up, and I got a prejudice against anybody watchin' me when I'm in a barber chair."

The marshal had a hunch the Gun-cat's request was dictated by something more than prejudice. But he played along.

"I know how you feel, son. I'll shove 'em to different pasture."

The Gun-cat nodded. "I'm obliged. Take Judie with you."

"I don't want to go," Judie spoke up.

The marshal caught her eye, and she said, "Oh, all right."

"Come back in about twenty minutes," the Gun-cat said slowly. "I'll have somethin' to show you."

AFTER they had gone, Fritz spread the barber apron over the Gun-cat, fastening it securely at the neck. Only his head and his

legs from the knees down showed from beneath the apron. Fritz tilted back the chair.

Old Herman was still standing close, his little round eyes staring. Under the spread of light from the hanging oil lamp, his eyes were red-veined and running a little water.

The Gun-cat spoke to him. "It ought to be you in the chair instead of me, Old Herman. You look like you've been cheating the barber all your born days."

"He won't leave me cut it," said Fritz.

"I like it this way," Herman snapped, with an old man's peevish stubbornness. Retreating hastily, he took up his broom. The floor was clean, but he swept anyway.

Fritz dunked a towel in a pan of hot water, wrung it out, rippled it a couple times to let the air take the biting edge off the heat, then applied it deftly to the Gun-cat's face, looping it under his square-cut chin and swathing it upward across his cheeks and eyelids. Turning away, Fritz let the Gun-cat steam for a moment.

The Gun-cat lay there, unmoving. If he felt any premonition of danger, he didn't show it. The wet warmth of the towel tended to give him a feeling of sleepy indolence. He could hear Fritz working up the lather, with the brush handle clinking pleasantly against the inside of a shaving mug. And he could hear the monotonous *shuf-shuf-shuf* of Old Herman's broom.

It was the sound of the sweeping broom which stopped first. A short moment later the sound of the shaving brush against the inside of the mug stopped. Still another short moment and the Gun-cat was aware of somebody's breathing presence near the barber chair.

"Fritz," the Gun-cat began, and broke off with an inarticulate gurgle as the air was half squeezed from him by a sudden pinching pressure across his waist.

He realized what had happened, and he strained forward in the chair with all his tensioned strength.

Too late!

The "drunk-man" strap which had lain casually on his lap under the barber apron had been pulled tight. It now cut across his middle, like a band of steel, piñoning his arms at the bend of his elbows, and fastened somewhere behind the chair out of reach. He felt like a trussed-up mummy.

And now the first sound reached his ears since the stopping of all sound in the barber shop. He couldn't identify it at first—a kind of ghoulish clacking, running the scale up and down, not loud, not much above a pur, but with a mechanical quality which set the teeth on edge. It was eerie. It didn't sound like a noise that anything alive could make.

But all at once it came to the Gun-cat; he identified the flesh-crawling sound. *It was a man laughing.*

Straining against the chair strap, the Gun-cat shook his head violently to rid his face of the wet towel. He succeeded. The towel pludded down in his lap, making a wet stain in the barber apron which covered him like a shroud.

With the towel off his face, the Gun-cat blinked. There, bending over him, staring with his red-veined, watery eyes, was Old Herman Clegg.

Old Herman made the ghoulish clacking sound again, and now it was easy to tell it was laughter, because his scrawny shoulders shook to it, and his slack mouth was screwed upward at the corners into a hideous half-moon shape.

It was easier to interpret that unnaturally bright, restless look in the round little eyes now, too. It was a glitter of animal cruelty; perhaps even of insanity.

The Gun-cat held his voice to an undisturbed quietness. "You've had your joke, Old Herman. Now suppose you let me out of here."

"All in good time," Old Herman said, his voice grating harshly. "You want a little barberin' first, don't you?"

"Where's Fritz?" the Gun-cat demanded. He knew well enough where Fritz was. By twisting his neck he could see the young barber's limp body where it lay sprawled on the floor. But it was the Gun-cat's idea to keep Old Herman talking until Marshal Elmer Woody, at the end of his allotted twenty minutes, came in.

THE marshal was on Old Herman's mind, too. He growled, "With Woody about due back, we haven't got much time. Fritz, since you ask, lies unconscious from a bump on the head. I made the sand bag myself. A valuable weapon. Effective, and it makes no sound. I lowered the lad's body to the floor, and it made no sound, either. Old Herman is sprier—and stronger—and smarter than anyone thinks."

He stepped to the shelf and picked up a razor. He tried the edge along the ball of his thumb. Then he came back and started sharpening the razor near the Gun-cat's ear. The rhythmic smoothing of the steel across the strop sounded innocent enough, no more alarming than the *shuf-shuf-shuf* his push broom had made—if a man could keep his mind off the Red X murders.

"What's the idea sharpenin' the razor, Old Herman?" the Gun-cat asked.

"The better to shave you with!" That laugh of eerie clackings sounded. "So you're the man who never trusts another man's razor against his throat! A first time for everything, I always say."

He quit stropping the razor. The Swedish steel made a *ting* under the quick pressure of his thumbnail. He started stropping again.

"You're a smart man, Old Herman," the Gun-cat stalled desperately. "A man has to be smart to get another man to do all his dirty work for him. That's how you arranged it, right? Got me to kill off all your pals? What was the matter, were they getting out of hand, or were you just figurin' why should you split with them?"

"It was my scheme, not theirs!" Old Herman snarled. "I came here and organized it. Why should I split with range rats? The unholy four were nothing except what I made them. I formed the plans and generaled everything from here. That note you intercepted in the barber mug was meant for me. I didn't mind helping you decipher it, because it concerned only a side deal of Duce Wen's."

The Gun-cat nodded. "You were clever all the way through, Old Herman. The barber shop was the nerve-center for all Red X activity, wasn't it, and not the Black Buffalo, as everyone thought?"

"The shop was a good blind," Old Herman admitted. "During the day everyone came here. I could give my orders and receive my reports without fear of detection. Because who would suspect Old Herman with his push broom? In all these weeks of my maturing plans, I made only one slip—"

"And you corrected that by Xing out the old barber when he began to get wise."

"Exactly."

"And back in Gold Float, the young puncher, Holt Clay, in the hotel—"

"That was one of Old Herman's cleverest strokes," the old man explained proudly. "Holt Clay was a good boy, in no way dangerous to me. I killed him solely for your benefit, to impress upon you the necessity of coming to Cottonwood Crossing to rid the town of the unholy four."

"And the other Red X brands in Gold Float, on your boot toes, on my handkerchief. And on the shaving mugs here in the barber shop. You made them yourself?"

"Of course." Old Herman quit stropping again, reached out his stringy fingers and pinched a hair from the Gun-cat's head. With a single, gentle pressure of the razor blade he sliced off the hair two inches away from where he held it.

His eyes gloated. "The razor, Mr. Bodman, is sharp enough to give you the closest shave you ever had in your life. And when the marshal comes back, he will understand when I tell him that it was only by a fortunate accident that I overcame Fritz Brown after he had carved a Red X into your throat. And, of course, Fritz will be unable to call me a liar because he, too, will be dead."

Sweat was beading out on the Gun-cat's face; but he kept his voice calm. "So the way it sums up, Old Herman, you used the unholy four for the build-up work around here, and then to keep from having to split with them, you imported me to kill them for you."

"Neat, wasn't it?" Again Old Herman gave his ghoulish laugh. "I get credit for being a public-spirited man and throw off all suspicion from myself; and at the same time I get rid of a wolf pack which was showing signs of restlessness. They would, I think, eventually have torn me down. But I beat them to it. I got from them everything I wanted. Their work was done. The town was thoroughly terrorized. Property was already gravitating to my hands. The railroad is coming through. I will be a very rich man. A very, very rich man. I will have the shares of Gem Voorhis, Murdo Pasquele, Claw Cranberry, and Duce Wen—all four. And now, Mr. Bodman, your shave!"

His little round eyes glowing with satanic light, Old Herman brandished the razor and started lowering it to the Gun-cat's face. His hand trembled. The razor shook dangerously.

"I'm an old man," he cackled. "My hand shakes. If the razor should slip and cut a Red X on your throat—"

BUT the razor didn't slip. It was the Gun-cat who slipped. Out of the barber chair. Out from the certainty of that dripping Red X death. He went out of the chair with gliding ease, as though he had never been strapped in at all!

It was doubtful if Old Herman ever understood exactly what had happened. As he saw his quarry eluding him, as by magic, he gave a demoniacal shriek, and sprang after him, slashing with the razor.

The blade pinked the Gun-cat's throat as he dodged. Then like a cat he swiveled around, stepped in close, and his own hand stabbed out. Yellow light from the oil lamp glinted from something he held tightly gripped.

A minute or two later Marshal Woody was identifying it as a bone-handled pocketknife. He pulled the knife from the heart of dead Herman

Clegg, and wiped the blade off with one of Fritz's barber towels.

Most of the town was crowding again at the open barber-shop door. There would be little sleep for anyone tonight in Cottonwood Crossing. The four who were feared, were feared no more. And now their unsuspected master lay dead on the barber-shop floor. Excited talk ran from mouth to mouth.

They had been stunned when the Gun-cat dropped the last of the unholy four, stunned, with the weight of dread still clinging to them. But now the haunting unease was fading from their eyes. There would be great jubilation tonight as Cottonwood Crossing citizens celebrated their day of freedom from Red X terror.

Marshal Woody handed the pocketknife back to the Gun-cat. "Thing like that comes in handy sometimes," was all he said.

"Yeah."

"You used it first under cover of the barber apron to cut the strap in two, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

The marshal scratched at his rocky jaw. "Why, hell, you must've been looking for all this to happen! You practically gave Old Herman the idea by pretendin' to be so tired and askin' about how the strap worked, and leavin' it lay across your lap, and all. Then you made it possible for him, by havin' me clear the watchers away from in front and tellin' Judie and me not to come back for twenty minutes. Was it a put-up job, son?"

"Yeah," the Gun-cat said again.

Fritz Brown had come out of his sand-bag sleep. "Twice in the same day," he groaned. "It's gettin' to be a habit with me." Then he became aware that it was Judie who held him so tightly.

"Are you all right, dear?" she was asking frantically.

"Still some groggy," he told her. "But with you here, I'm perkin' up every second." Then his glance fell on dead Herman Clegg, and he looked at the Gun-cat questioningly.

"I'm uncommon sorry about the bump you got on the head, feller," the Gun-cat told him. "But I had to bring Old Herman into the open and make him trip himself."

"The thing that gets me," Fritz said, "is that Old Herman should turn out this way. Why, you must have suspected him all the time!"

THE Gun-cat nodded. "I had Old Herman's number before I came here. The first thing was back in Gold Float in Albert Klein's barber shop, when Old Herman shied away so strenuously from a haircut. I wondered then, if he could maybe be usin' his long hair to cover up his ears, like a few others have done—Claw Cranberry, for instance. So I watched Old Herman close. I got a glimpse of one of his ears. It was notched, all right.

"But that didn't prove anything.

"Not in itself it didn't. But when a man's once been ear-notched for horse stealin', it makes you watch him a little closer. What clinched it about him was in the hotel room where Old Herman's companion, young Holt Clay, got his throat cut. Somebody in that crowded room put the Red X brand on my handkerchief while it was in my pocket. I figured it had been transferred from a Red X that someone had first marked on his thumb with red ink. So I made everybody show thumbs. I got credit for a failure on that, because there was no red-ink mark showin' on anybody's thumb. But there was somthin' just as incriminatin'. One man was showin' a thumb

callous that had been fresh rubbed down like as if by a bit of sandstone or somethin'—"

"Old Herman!"

"Yeah. He'd scoured the red-ink stain off his thumb. I watched him pretty close from then on."

There was an uproar from out in the street. Somebody had started cheering, and in the shake of a steer's tail, every man, woman, and child had taken up the cry. They were cheering for Charlie Gun-cat Bodman. And in the whole-hearted, unrestrained tone of their cheering it was apparent that they had shaken off the last shred of the fear that had stalked their lives since the Red X terror had cast its shadow over Cottonwood Crossing.

"She's your town, son," Marshal Woody remarked.

The Gun-cat did not answer. He was looking on through sleepy, half-closed eyes. So he had bought himself another town? Paid for it in blood and bullets. Made it a place where honest men could live in safety with their wives. And there was Fritz. And there was Judie. Holding hands. Stars in their eyes. Because Charlie Bodman had broken the gun rule in Cottonwood Crossing.

He looked around and caught Judie watching him.

"Fritz," she said, "Mr. Bodman looks tired. Why don't you let him relax in your chair and give him a nice finger-rub all over his scalp and face, the way you do me, sometimes?"

"Sure," Fritz agreed. "Maybe you'd even like a haircut?"

The Gun-cat sliced his hand out, waving Fritz back. "No more barber chairs in my life for a long time to come. Thankin' you all the same, but I'm thinkin' of leavin' my hair grow long—even at the risk of havin' folks take me for a horse thief."

Everyone laughed. But Charlie Bodman only sighed. His guns had brought peace and security, and that was fine for other folks. But how much of it could he, himself, take? Not very much, he was afraid. Perhaps some day there'd be someone who would look at him as Judie looked at Fritz—that would make all the difference in the world.

His hands moved restlessly to build a cigarette. A match bloomed under the rasp of his thumbnail. Through the smoke he saw the marshal leaning toward him.

"Somethin' I've been holdin' off from tellin' you, son. There's a stranger in town tearin' his shirt to meet you. I been stallin' him. Didn't know but what we might induce you to stay with us. Cottonwood Crossin' would do right handsome by you, Gun-cat. A feller's—"

"A stranger, you say? Wantin' what?"

"Wantin' a fast man with a gun."

"Yeah? Where abouts?"

"Down Mesquite way."

"They havin' trouble in there?" The Gun-cat blew out a mouthful of smoke.

The marshal nodded. "Range bully's got the whole territory hogtied and diamond-hitched."

"Mesquite, eh. I never been down around there." A contemplative light shown in the Gun-cat's eyes. Contemplative, and something more. There was no denying it. In spite of the weariness he felt, in spite of the fight tension he was still under, he could feel the stirring of new excitement in his blood.

He grinned suddenly, dropped his hand to the marshal's shoulder. "This stranger, Elmer—take me to him."

THE END.

CARAVAN OF DEATH

BY HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

Ross McClintock raised his hand to the wagon train behind him. "Better pull up here," he called. "We won't find a better place to bury him."

"Reckon yo're right," buckskin-clad Bill Johnson, who rode at his side, agreed. "They've had half an hour to say good-by to him. Better tell Morrell to git it over with."

A chill, monotonous wind rustled the endless sea of sagebrush as the wagon train pulled up in response to his cry. The broad gray skies had been overcast for days, and the deep gloom shadowing the group of pioneer men and women had lasted nearly as long. Flight from death! That was what this hurried late fall trek into the western wilderness had become for the better than a dozen high-sided Conestoga wagons, with their weather-worn tilts.

Ross McClintock, freighter and leader of the train, turned in his saddle so that his level gray gaze traveled back over the way they had come. Broad-shouldered and self-

reliant, a man in his early thirties who had seen service in the border regiments and knew this country for what it was, he too, was deeply conscious of the grim fate which had dogged the wagons for days.

Threat of death from the bands of angry, treacherous Sioux which the army was driving north and west out of the Powder River country no longer menaced them. It was closer, more relentless than that. Death was traveling with them now. There was sickness in this train—mysterious, swift, snuffing out the lives of young and old in a few hours.

"Young Bolton is the seventh one to go in three days," old Bill Johnson muttered grimly as the mules and oxen hauled up in their traces, keeping place in the line.

"And no help this side of Morrell's fort," Ross said soberly. "We can't

waste any time about putting him under the ground."

At his terse direction a trio of gaunt, hard-bitten men hurried forward with shovels to dig a shallow grave in the center of the trail ahead. Afterward, animals and wagons would pass over the spit, tramping down the earth, rudely obliterating the fresh grave so that the bones of the deceased might rest undisturbed.

Gid Morrell, tall, lean, sallowly handsome, stood by until the grave was dug. At a sign from Ross he touched a man on the shoulder and they went back to one of the wagons, to return a few moments later carrying young Bolton's body.

"All right, Gid, say a few words," Ross told Morrell. "Make it short."

Morrell nodded. A man of some experience on the frontier, he was sober of face now, though Ross had already put him down as concerned only with the safe delivery of his supplies at his post in the Grand Coulee. Back at Fort Laramie, however, when these Oregon-bound settlers had joined up with them for added protection, Morrell had welcomed the arrangement.

Over the already filling grave, Gid Morrell spoke the few solemn words of commitment he remembered. Ross' thoughtful glance strayed to Valerie Harkness and her father, standing sadly by with the others. Valerie was a quiet girl, with frank brown eyes. Even now her courage and stamina were evident. But Cole Harkness was another matter. Already past sixty, a man born and trained to a less rugged way of life, he looked gray and worn. The West held no glad promise of widening opportunity for him. How he had been persuaded to invest his money in these supplies for Morrell's post McClintock had never heard, but there were times when, watching Gid's burning gaze fasten itself possessively, almost devouringly, on Valerie Harkness, he told himself bitterly that he understood.

THE burial accomplished, there was no delay. Ross swung around in the saddle, swept his arm forward. The cries of the drivers echoed as they started the teams. The first wagon jolted over the newly made grave and passed on.

"Catch up! Catch up!" the universal cry rang along the train.

Ross took his place at its head, riding with Gid Morrell and Bill Johnson.

"S'pose we'll be stoppin' again 'fore nightfall," the grizzled frontiersman observed gloomily. "It's rubbin' us out one by one. I ain't never seen the likes of it before, even 'mongst the redskins. I was hopin' that by crossin' the mountains we'd leave it behind us."

"It's mighty plain we haven't," Ross answered. "People dying like flies, and nothing we can do for them. They need medicine, warm beds." He turned to Morrell. "We won't reach your place a minute too soon."

Gid appeared to be turning something over in his mind. "This disease seems to be mighty catchin'," he remarked at length.

Ross shot him a glance. "What's the matter? It ain't getting you, is it?"

"No . . . no, I'm all right," Morrell responded nervously. "I was just wonderin' about takin' these people in. We all may be wiped out. Don't know what this sickness is—"

"Great sufferin' wild cats!" Bill exploded. "Do you mean to r'ar up an' say there's any question in yore mind about takin' 'em in?"

"A man's got to be careful. I got people dependin' on me," Morrell answered. He said no more, but

thereafter he rode by himself for a time, unusually thoughtful for him. Later he dropped back along the train. Ross saw him talking earnestly with Valerie Harkness and her father.

"Wonder what he's got in his mind?" Ross asked himself, his brows drawing together in a frown.

Morrell rode up to him a little while later. "I've decided to push on ahead, first thing in the morning," he announced. "The Harknesses'll go with me. We ought to reach the Coulee before night. You'll be along with the train some time next day."

Ross stared at him in surprise. "You can't be serious about this!" he exploded. "It's risking Valerie and her father's lives, not to mention your own! Besides, the train would be weakened by two more men, if anything should happen. And as you say, going on ahead now would save you only a few hours—"

The cold, fixed expression on Gid Morrell's face told him his words were having no effect whatever.

"We won't argue the matter, McClintock," Morrell told him flatly. "I've talked it over with Harkness and he agrees that my plan is the best."

"What does he know about it?" Ross demanded scornfully. "He never laid eyes on Indian country before." It was his private opinion, amounting practically to definite knowledge, that Cole Harkness was so thoroughly under this man's domination that he would accept unquestioningly any suggestion Morrell had to offer.

"I'll see to it that we get through all right," Gid retorted coolly. "It's too late in the season for the Crows to be raidin' this far south." And then, persuasively: "Gettin' back to the post a day ahead will give me a chance to get things all fixed for you."

"Fixed in just what way?" Ross demanded, not liking the ambiguity in the words. Morrell's eyes narrowed cautiously.

"I'll be able to see what medicines I've got, and sober up old Berthold. He ain't a doctor by no means, but he knows how to dose a man when he's not drunk."

"There's no other reason for leaving us, eh?" Ross queried bluntly.

"Well, if it's any of your business, I'm gettin' Miss Harkness away from these death wagons before she's taken down herself!" was the uncompromising answer.

Ross was sure that Morrell was taking refuge in excuses now, and he found little trouble in guessing why. Getting Valerie away from the ravening pestilence in the train was not the man's chief concern. Morrell was really intent on getting himself beyond reach of it. For such an attitude Ross had nothing but contempt.

"Have it your way," he said thinly. "But I'll speak to Harkness myself before you go. I want to be sure he understands what he's doing."

Morrell turned savage in a flash. "Go ahead!" he grated. "I ain't askin' nothin' from you. But just be sure you confine yourself to the truth, McClintock, and don't try to throw a scare into those folks. I'm perfectly capable of lookin' after 'em!"

"And after yourself, too," Ross amended.

"Damn you, you've been gettin' mighty important in your own mind since you took charge of this train, McClintock! Don't figure that entitles you to shove your nose into my affairs! You're haulin' my goods in your wagons—that's all!"

THE short, gloomy afternoon soon drew to a close. Ross and Bill Johnson chose a spot three hundred yards from a drying creek bed which promised short rations of water—the best they could find—in which the train corraled for the night. The cooking fires began to flicker in the dusk.

It was a dispirited camp. Upward of a dozen men, women and children lay sick unto death. The bright hopes of the previous summer, in the cheery camps along the Platte, had long since died out for these hardy people. Even the dogs omitted their usual evening bickering.

Soon after supper, Ross strolled over to the Harkness wagon. He found Valerie and her father seated before their fire. Haggard as Cole Harkness was from the unaccustomed travel, he could still be courtly. He struggled to his feet as the younger man approached. But it was the girl who spoke.

"Good evening, Ross."

Ross greeted them quietly. "Morrell tells me that you're going on ahead with him in the morning," he opened up. Valerie would have answered, but her father cut her off.

"Yes, we've talked it over and decided that's the thing to do. Gideon thinks Valerie should reach the Grand Coulee at the earliest possible moment."

Ross nodded woodenly. The girl's earnest gaze, as if pleading with him to understand, checked the words trembling on his lips. "I just want to be sure you know what you're doing," he said.

For ten minutes he discussed Harkness's decision with him. The old man appeared pathetically dependent on Gid Morrell's opinions. Ross shook his head regretfully.

"But surely nothing can happen to us, Ross?" Valerie spoke up at last. She seemed to be struggling with her words, weighing each one carefully. "You'll be arriving at the post shortly after we do."

"I'll send Bill out on a long scout before you leave," he assured her. Valerie thanked him and appeared relieved.

"I'm willing to take some risk, if only I can do something to help these people," she declared earnestly. "We're so helpless, here in the middle of nowhere. At the post, I can at least get beds ready; perhaps even some simple medicines."

She was wholly sincere, Ross realized. Yet he recognized Morrell's arguments, used unconsciously. Again he asked himself, as he had done a hundred times, whether Valerie was really in love with Gid Morrell. Strange as it seemed, it was not impossible. And yet, true or not, Ross was afraid that it was not toward the happiness and security they sought that the girl and her father were headed in traveling westward, but toward possible tragedy and grief. Nothing he could do to save them from that fate would have been too much. But he was powerless in the face of their determination.

He took his leave of Valerie half an hour later with more than a touch of regret. There would be no time for words in the morning. It was a wrench to have this fine girl go out of his life forever.

ROSS was astir with the first gray streaks of dawn in the morning. Morrell was already abroad, and the Harknesses. Before they finished breakfast, Bill Johnson rode into camp from an early scout.

"Reckon she's all clear fer yuh," he nodded curtly to Gid. "Jest be shore yuh keep a watch an' keep travelin' right brisk in the open."

Ten minutes later the trio swung astride and struck out. They soon disappeared over a swell of the prairie. Ross saw Valerie look back at the last moment. Then she was gone.

Full daylight saw the wagon train pushing on once more. As the dull day dragged on, the pioneers looked forward to the morrow with brightening hopes. One day more, and they would reach Grand Coulee. To them it spelled warmth, shelter, care, a chance for life. And yet, late the following afternoon, it was a ragged, beaten line of wagons, drawn by jaded animals, that rolled out on the last prairie swell, from which men could look down into the long half mile wide depression in which Morrell's trading post stood.

Ross gestured them onward, but there was little need for encouraging words now. Poor and bleak as the post looked, it was a cheery sight to them. Voices could be heard raised in cries of joy. The mules quickened their stride and the wagons rolled forward almost briskly.

The fort was a one-story log affair, inclosed within a stout stockade. Just now the gates were closed tightly. Ross and Bill Johnson rode forward, firing their guns in the air to announce the train's arrival.

The gates did not swing open with the expected alacrity as they drew near. A man thrust his head over the stockade. It was Gid Morrell, a rifle in his hands. Johnson waved to him.

"Open up, here, an' be quick about it!" he called.

To their blank surprise Morrell shook his head. "We ain't lettin' you in!" he yelled. "We voted on it, and the answer is no!"

Ross was the first to find his voice. "Do you mean you're turning us away to rot and die?" he demanded incredulously. "What sort of a human skunk are you?"

"You heard our decision!" Morrell flung back. "We ain't changin' it!"

Other men were showing their heads above the stockade. They seconded Morrell's ultimatum somewhat reluctantly. Staring at them, not one a stranger to him, Ross knew the stand they were taking was Morrell's, not their own.

"Damn yore stinkin' soul, Morrell, yo're responsible for this!" Bill Johnson whipped out fiercely, recovering from the shock of his surprise. "This was your game when you pulled away from us yesterday!" He raised the rifle resting across his saddle bow. "I'll settle yore hash right here!"

Ross stopped him before he could shoot.

"Hold it, Bill," he warned. "I'll make this wolf crawl. His own wagons had rolled up. He motioned them to turn back. And raising his voice: "Morrell, take a look at those mountains! They're blocked with snow. There won't be no more freighting before spring!"

Morrell's eyes narrowed, but his tone was as truculent as before. "That ain't my worry."

"You'll change your tune in two minutes, or it will be! Open up and take us in, or you'll never lay your hands on a pound of flour in my wagons!"

"Don't you try any trick like that!" roared Morrell. "Those goods belong to me! I'll take the law in my own hands to protect 'em if I have to!"

"Begin whenever you're ready, Morrell!" Ross challenged. "Bill, you drop the first man who throws a rifle to his shoulder!"

Bat LeBlanc, Morrell's half-breed assistant, foolishly ignored the warning. Bill had his sights trained on him in a second.

"Drop it," Bill warned, "or I'll separate you from yore eatin'! This old girl an' me kin part yore hair at this distance!"

LeBlanc quickly dropped his gun and the others showed no inclination to take up old Bill's defi.

The men had got down from the wagons and moved close to McClintock. "Go back," he told them, without taking his attention away from Morrell for a second. "Get your wagons turned. We're dropping back to the creek."

"You'll never get away with this, McClintock!" Morrell warned. "Starvin' my people is worse than what you're accusin' me of doin'! We've got women and children here, too!"

Indian and half-breed women—they could not suffer too much from scanty rations. But there was Valerie Harkness. The thought pulled Ross up sharply. Valerie! Her father, knuckling under to Morrell. It was a bitter moment for Ross McClintock, but he made his decision instantly.

"If there's anyone on your side of the fence who wants to throw in with us, send them out, Morrell," he called. "We'll take them in, and we'll feed them. But you'll never get your hands on these supplies!"

The men on the stockade turned to Morrell as if willing to entertain the offer, but he had eyes only for the retreating wagons.

"I'll see you in hell for this!" he yelled at Ross.

ROSS made no answer. Eyes alert, he and old Bill fell back. Reaching the train, he called to the weary drivers: "Keep your wagons rolling. We'll camp on Feather Creek!"

Slowly, dejectedly, the weary travelers turned their faces to the back trail. Glum, silent, they corraled and out-spanned on a grassy flat beside the creek, a mile and a half from the post. Ross announced that a council of war would be held immediately after supper.

Every man in the train who was able to keep his feet was there, grim-faced and expectant. Tersely Ross explained the situation, and unfolded his plans.

"We'll probably be attacked sooner or later," he warned. "It may come tonight. But if we're ready for it we can fight them off. Morrell can't throw more than a score against us."

Bearded Asa Winton, a giant of a man, stepped into the circle of firelight. His face was gaunt with anguish. Conversation ceased at his approach. His wife had died.

"Sarah's gone," he said with an effort. "Died in my arms a few minutes ago. Seemed to strangle at the end, couldn't git her breath—"

The men nodded gravely, removing their hats out of respect for the dead woman.

"Tomorrow it'll be the young uns, I reckon," Winton went on, his voice breaking. "Diphtheria—black diphtheria—that's what it is! I saw Sarah go, and I know." He turned his bleak eyes on Ross. "McClintock, I'm gittin' into that post if I have to try it alone. I'm tellin' you, man, we can stop this sickness if we get our hands on some quinine, a little alum and some spirits of turpentine—things they're shore to have!"

The despairing husbands, fathers and brothers, and even old Bill Johnson, chorused approval of his words.

"Jump 'em afore they jump us," argued Bill. "Turn Injun on 'em, I say! Jest before dawn we'll put a man over the wall an' start the ball rollin'."

"If it's action you want, I'm for

it," Ross agreed. "In the meantime, we'll put out double guards. Don't forget the supplies in my wagons are our big hope. We've got to hang onto them no matter what happens."

Almost with first dark, silence settled over the camp. Old Bill took charge of the first watch of half a dozen men. At midnight Ross took over.

Less than thirty minutes later Ross caught a guarded scuffling in the darkness up the creek. He challenged sharply. There was no answer, but he was not surprised when old Bill materialized at his side, rifle in hand, to peer keenly into the shadows.

"It's jest a bronc grazin' out there," Bill grunted. "But don't let it fool yuh. Trouble may be comin' at us from another direction."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the flat crack of a rifle sounded from across the camp. It was followed by another, and then suddenly the night was hideous with the crashing of a dozen rifles.

Ross was well acquainted with the class of trappers, free traders and half-breeds who had elected to spend the winter at Grand Coulee. They could fight fiercely when they had to. Pouring a volley into the wagons, they charged forward like savages. Shrill yells rent the night. The thunder of racing hoofs swelled.

It broke abruptly as the men in the wagons cut loose with a wicked counterblast. "That's givin' it to 'em!" Bill Johnson yelled, giving an ear-splitting whoop. "Let 'em have it again! By grab, they're askin' fer it!"

After the first broken thrust, there was no more ordered assault. Ross thought once that he caught the sound of Gid Morrell's voice, roaring orders, but the attackers failed to rally. Flame freckled the darkness as they fired at random. The sick, and the women and children, had already been moved to the other side of the camp.

LESS than an hour before dawn, the shooting slacked off. "I reckon that's all over," Bill commented soberly. "Don't leave us much time fer surprisin' the varmints."

"We'll have a try at it just the same," Ross answered. "You fetch a rope, Bill. As soon as we figure they've got to bed, we'll make our play. We won't use the horses. Six men will be enough."

He picked experienced men to accompany him. Two hundred yards from the post they dropped to hands and knees and cautiously crawled forward. Fifteen minutes later they were at the stockade. Already the first faint signs of dawn were appearing in the east.

"Bend down, Bill, so I can get my feet on your shoulders," Ross whispered. "I'm going over. We'll never make it if we hold off any longer."

The old frontiersman bent down and Ross climbed up on his back. Tossing his rope over a stockade paling, he started to draw himself up, but even as his hands clasped the top of the post a cry was raised inside the fort. The next instant a gun banged, spraying the stockade with buckshot.

"*Tenez!* Dose faller she's comin' over de stockade!" a cry boomed. Ross recognized Bat LeBlanc's bull-like voice.

"Ross, come down!" old Bill cried. "You can't make it! They'll be makin' hash out of us if we don't pull back quick!"

Realizing that the post was fully aroused by now, Ross loosened his hold and dropped lightly to the

ground. "We've got to run for it, men!" he jerked out. "Get to cover before they cut us down!"

Back in camp, Bill Johnson refused to be cast down by their failure. "Tonight may be another matter," he insisted stoutly. "I'm goin' to roll in fer a little sleep, Ross, an' then take a long scout to the north. If everythin' goes well, I'll be back, come noon."

There were wounded men now to add to the sick in the wagons. Ross saw them cared for before he turned in for an hour's rest. He awakened to learn that another child had died in the early morning. It pointed all too plainly to what the end must be for all if they remained where they were.

Noon came and went before Bill returned. When he hove into sight, Ross saw that he was pushing his pony at a driving gallop, his excitement evident.

"Ross, there's hell a-poppin' now an' fer shore!" he burst out as he slid off his horse. "Man-Who-Walks-Like-A-Bear an' a big party of Crows are comin' at us! They'll be here in an hour. Mebbe less!"

ROSS stared at him doubtingly. "Sure you're right, Bill? It's pretty late in the season for a big war party to be out."

"I tell yuh I seen 'em!" the old scout whipped out fiercely. "If I hadn't knocked off a couple of 'em an' threw 'em on a crooked trail, they'd be here now!"

"But how did they know where to look for us?"

"I'll tell yuh how they knew!" Bill said bitterly. "I seen that crooked breed, LeBlanc, palaverin' with 'em."

There was only one answer to this. Ross' mind leaped to it in a flash. "Morrell!" he exclaimed. Johnson jerked a nod.

"It's plain as print!"

The men who had gathered about them were buzzing with excitement. "It means a massacre if them Injuns reach us, McClintock!" Asa Winton ground out. "We can't stand off an attack now! Our only chance is to git inside Morrell's fort, an' do it in a hurry!"

Ross knew he was right. "Hitch up and get the wagons ready to roll!" he ordered.

Bill just stared at him hopelessly. "Ross, are yuh loco? We'll have hell pourin' into us from two sides! We can't fight our way into Morrell's stockade!"

"We'll get in," Ross assured him. Wheeling toward camp, he snapped out directions to his own freighters that set them to stripping one of the heavily loaded freight wagons down to the box. Grabbing their axes then, the men ran up the creek. There was timber along the bottom—iron-hard cedars, eighteen inches through at the butt. Chips began to fly as the axes hacked them. Spelling one another every few minutes, it was not long before the men had two of the trees felled.

"Trim 'em down to the trunks now!" Ross ordered.

Bill watched these proceedings with puzzled eyes for some minutes. "What's the idee o' this?" he grunted as Ross hurried back to the camp.

"I'm going to sling these trees under one of my wagons, lash 'em down and knock that stockade gate to kindling wood," was the terse answer. "There's a three-hundred-yard slope from the rim of the coulee to the gate. We'll take this wagon up on the rim and let her go!"

Bill's old face lit up. "By cracky, she'll work if yuh can git yore wagon

to hit the mark!" he declared enthusiastically.

"She'll hit, all right," Ross called back, hurrying on. "I'll ride the pole and make sure of it!"

The camp itself was a scene of confusion as the teams were hitched up, the women and children bundled into the wagons.

"I want all hands up the creek for a minute!" Ross called out.

Stark despair lent strength to these men. Only speedy, concerted action could save them and their families from destruction now, and they followed Ross' grim-faced lead blindly. Somehow the heavy cedars were lifted up and lashed beneath the freight wagon, already hitched and waiting. It started immediately for the rim of the coulee. The rest of the train lined up along the creek, the drivers ready to lash their teams into a mad run the moment the gate fell. No sign of the war party had appeared as yet, but its threat was grim, relentless. At any moment the Crows might come swooping wildly out of the hills.

Ross and old Bill studied the post from the rim. Ross knew a moment's regret that Valèrie had to be mixed up in all this. He wondered how she was taking it, certainly by now she knew Gid Morrell for what he was. Wrenching his thoughts from the girl, he ordered the horses taken from the traces and the wagon made ready for its wild ride down the slope. He could see the train drawn up along the creek. Expectancy rode these men hard. In a few cases, there were rifles even in the work-calloused hands of the women. Somewhere a sick girl was moaning piteously.

"Better not waste no time with yore thinkin'," old Bill jerked out. "Ain't seen so much as a feather yet, but I kin plumb smell redskins. An' the old smeller ain't never fooled me!"

"All right!" Ross said evenly. "Let her go!"

Steering from behind, with the wagon between him and the stockade, he had no fear of stray shots from that quarter. As the clumsy vehicle started to move down the slope, slowly at first, he found to his relief that it answered readily to his guidance.

A moment or two, and he had to trot to keep up; presently he started to run. The wagon was picking up speed with incredible swiftness.

Swaying, bouncing, jolting, the juggernaut careened down the declivity at express-train speed. The stockade loomed ahead. Ross had all he could do to hang on, running in great leaps. He still had the heavy cedar butts aimed squarely at the log gate. Even as he made sure of this, he tripped on some unseen obstacle that flung him headlong.

It seemed to him, lying there, that the battering-ram leaped into the air and sailed forward. It struck the stockade gate with a mighty crash. Logs flew in every direction like jackstraws, splinters flashing a hundred feet in the air. Leaving a gaping hole behind it, the wagon sped on across the compound, half burying itself in a fur storage house on the other side.

ROSS sprang to his feet, a shout of exultation welling to his lips. Drawing his gun, he had just started to run forward when Bill Johnson and the others swept toward him on their horses, making for the broken gate. Bill gave Ross a hand up. In another minute they were inside the stockade. Swinging out of the hull, they were fiercely ready to sweep all opposition before them.

Bewilderingly, there was none. Buckskin-clad trappers and frontiersmen came running. But they were unarmed. There was no wrath in these bearded faces, only something like relief and gladness. Ross was nonplused. He halted in his tracks, his gun lowering.

"Waal, it's about time yuh got here!" a big man answering to the name of Bitterroot Robbins told Ross. "We've been waitin' fer yuh to show up. Yuh wouldn't have hed to bust in that gate that way, neither, if yuh'd known. Morrell ain't left a gun amongst us!"

Other men came running out of the post buildings fearlessly. Even a few beaded Indian squaws put in an appearance. Plainly they had no thought of violence, and no fear of attack. Before Ross could ask Bitterroot what it all meant, a series of racketing shots from the other end of the compound whirled him around. A slug had torn through the shoulder of his coat, nicking him; another whined off the top of the stockade.

"It's Morrell!" Robbins growled. "He's stark mad! He's forted up in the far end of the post with the Harknesses! There can't nobody git near 'em!"

"Why didn't yuh stop him cold?" Bill rasped.

"We couldn't do a thing!" was the answer. "Morrell took us by surprise, disarmed us all! I tell yuh it made our blood boil when he sent LeBlanc off to bring Man-Who-Walks-Like-A-Bear's evil cutthroats down on you folks!"

Ross was quickly told what had happened; how the inmates of the post had revolted against Morrell's cruel and inhuman treatment of the wagon train. But Morrell had got the jump on them. To the last ditch he was fighting savagely to hold what he wanted. Valerie and her father were his prisoners.

Further firing put an abrupt end to his reflections. Morrell had barricaded himself and was intent on driving every man in sight from the compound. Men were making for shelter everywhere. Ross saw a half-breed trapper sprawl on the ground, shot in the back. Mad or not, Gid meant business.

The first of the wagons reached the smashed gate, a young boy handling the reins. He drove into the fort wildly, lashing his mules. "The Injuns!" he yelled shrilly. "They're comin' over the hill! There must be a thousand of 'em!"

Swiftly the rest of the wagons rolled in until the entire train was inside the stockade. Ross ordered their disposal so that they would be protected from Morrell's deadly fire. The last wagon, a heavily loaded freight, he directed to be jammed across the opening where the shattered gate hung. Over its top he glimpsed the chalked, yelping cavalcade of Crows, sweeping down on the post, only a matter of minutes too late for the massacre they had planned.

The moment was bread and meat to old Bill Johnson. "Git up on the platform an' give them red devils hell an' bear grease!" he screeched. "If LeBlanc's with 'em, he belongs to me!"

Man-Who-Walks-Like-A-Bear drew up his forces half a mile away after that first futile charge. Nothing was to be seen of Bat LeBlanc.

"That ole Crow hoss thief can't figger out jest what to do," Bill opined. "He ain't got no quarrel with Morrell an' he's smart 'nough to know he ain't got no chanct of liftin' our ha'r now."

Ross nodded. "Keep your eyes

on 'em, Bill, and don't let your men get in Morrell's line of fire. I'm going after him."

No sooner had he stepped into the open than a shot whipped past his face, coming from a barricaded room at the far end of the post. He leaped back and guardedly surveyed the situation. Morrell had picked his position with diabolical cunning. Nowhere at this end of the compound was there a building which offered cover at a distance of less than a hundred feet from the long main building of the post, its bold front unbroken save for the barricade of old wagon boxes and cordwood that Morrell had built in front of the room in which he was holed up.

Ross' mouth hardened. "He could pick me off a dozen times before I get across," he mused bleakly. "If I'm ever going to get near him, it won't be that way."

He studied the building. It was all of seventy feet in length, its heavily sodded roof nearly as high as the stockade. If he could reach that roof at the near end, he might have a chance. The Indians were circling the stockade again, firing at random. Risking a shot from Morrell, Ross sprang from cover suddenly and ran toward the corner of the trade room. Morrell fired instantly, once, twice—and Ross felt a burning graze across his ribs which whirled him around but did not make him lose balance.

REACHING the corner of the building, he found the rough ends of the logs jutting out at uneven lengths, affording a kind of rude ladder to the roof. Up it he climbed swiftly, to sprawl on the roof as an Indian slug screamed off the lock of his rifle. A glance told him it had ruined the firing mechanism. He cast the gun from him. From here out he must depend on his pistol.

Springing to his feet, he made for the far end of the roof. The red raiders circling the fort spotted him and swerved in close. By now he was directly above the room in which Morrell had barricaded himself.

Swinging over the roof's edge, Ross dropped to the ground between the barricade and the door. Never expecting anyone to get this close, Morrell had not even bothered to bar it. Ross put his shoulder against it and sent it rocking back on its leather hinges, the force of his momentum carrying him into the room.

Valerie's warning cry whirled him around in time for him to see her throw her weight against Morrell's arm and deflect his shot. Morrell caught her then and swung her in front of him.

"Throw down that gun, Ross, or you'll both get it!" he cried.

Ross did not hesitate. Firing from the hip, his bullet struck Morrell in the throat, spun him around and sent him crashing to the rammed earth floor, a deep sigh gushing from his lifeless lips.

At a movement in the far corner of the room, Ross heeled around. It was Cole Harkness. He sat bound hand and foot in a chair, a gag over his mouth.

But Valerie was Ross' immediate concern. He saw her sway, and he caught her before she fell. Her head pressed against his shoulder.

"Valerie, are you all right?" he implored. "You're not hurt?"

"No, Ross," she whispered tremulously. "I'm quite all right. I hoped and prayed you'd come. I . . . I knew you would try. Every minute here with Morrell has been unbearable. He threatened to kill my father when he insisted that the sick be brought in. Father's been bound

in that chair since early last evening."

Ross freed the old man and carried him into Morrell's bedroom. Harkness was worn and exhausted but not otherwise harmed.

The desultory firing from the stockade platform suddenly swelled to a roar. It brought Ross and the girl to the trade room door. A glad sight met their eyes. Old Bill, Bitterroot, and the others on the wall were waving their guns over their heads in sign of victory, proof that the Crow war party was pulling away for good.

"It leaves us with plenty to do," Valerie told Ross when he had explained the situation to her. "I've spoken to Berthold. He's not very dependable and he's never quite sober, but he says there're medicines here and that he knows what to do."

She turned to him impulsively and her eyes searched his face with a frankness that made his heart pound.

"Ross, I . . . I didn't think I could go on. But now that you're here I feel strong again. Between us we must save these people."

There was something in her eyes that he could not fail to understand. With a glad cry he swept her into his arms.

"Valerie, with you at my side I'd try anything and know I'd win!"

THE END

TRAINING THE COWHORSE

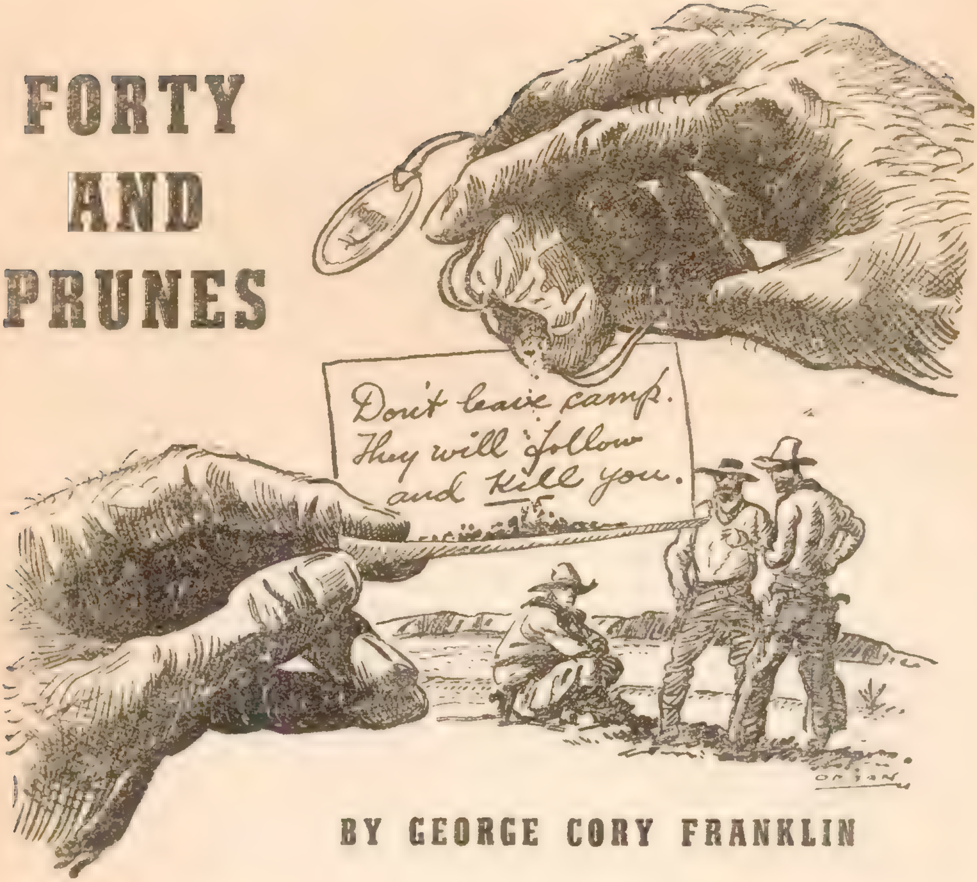
Hereditary traits have always played an important part in the selection of the horses used in handling wild cattle; more, perhaps, in the old days than in modern times, when fences and corrals have made the work of the cowhorse much easier. If a certain mare shows speed, intelligence and courage, a stockman may pay a fancy price for a foal from some famous racing stallion, since great care is taken in the early training of the colt.

First he is handled with a hackamore and taught to obey the slightest pressure of the rope reins on his neck. An old-time method for teaching a horse to stop quickly without harming his front legs or shoulders was to put shoes on his hind hoofs only. This caused the animal to "favor" his front feet, especially on rough ground, and lessened the danger of stiffening the shoulder muscles or springing the knees. If the front hoofs were kept tender, the animal would naturally be more cautious about where he put them, and when stopped suddenly would "set back" on his hind legs.

Having learned the rudiments of stopping quickly and responding to the rein of the rider instantly, the colt is then taught to follow the animal he is "pointed at" until he will do so without guidance. Much time and patience is required, and the trainer carefully avoids anything that may frighten the colt or cause him physical pain. He does everything in his power to make the animal take an interest in his work, and this includes associating him with an old, experienced horse, one that has no bad habits, such as shying or timidity.

Young horses are very imitative; they learn a great deal from watching the actions of other animals, and if not protected will pick up the faults of others as quickly as does a child. A good horse breaker is of much more value on a ranch than the most noted bronc buster.

FORTY AND PRUNES



BY GEORGE CORY FRANKLIN

Rusty Stevens knew he was making a mistake. Any good range man would. The outfit camped beside the Texas trail was plenty tough. Not only were they hard-faced men, but the desperation in their eyes, the searching glances they shot at Rusty, told him that danger threatened them.

Rusty had no choice now but to ride into the camp and take his chances. The men had already seen him, and if he turned back it would start trouble. There was a very special reason why he had to be careful of what he said.

The boss of the outfit was an overfed, pot-bellied, border ruffian, with long hair and a dark beard. He stood apart from the others, but Rusty noticed that two men were close behind him, their thumbs hooked in their belts.

Rusty let his sorrel gelding take a sniff or two of the dirty layout. "It's all right, Tango, nothin' is goin' to hurt you," he comforted. Tango breathed easier and handled his ears back and forth.

The camp leader held up a warning hand. "You're close enough. State your business and clear out."

Rusty glanced toward the chuck wagon. "What I was really after was grub. I made a mistake early this morning. I must have hit the wrong valley."

"Where were you headin' for?"

"Waco," Rusty answered.

One of the men said something to the man he called Blaney. He spoke in a voice too low for Rusty to catch more than a word or two. Blaney nodded, then turned back to Rusty. "There's oats in the front of the wagon. The cook will shuck out a bite for you."

Rusty took his saddle off and dried Tango's back before he fed him. He saw the men had gathered in a group around Blaney. They were talking in low tones. Their voices were too low for Rusty to hear and anyway he was too hungry to think of anything but food.

The cook was an old, broken-down cowhand of a different type from the others. He was more like the men Rusty had been accustomed to see with the southern herds that had gone through on their way to Dodge. Another surprise was the grub which was much better than Rusty had expected. Steak, sour-dough bread and molasses. Rusty noticed that the cook kept a close eye on Blaney's movements all the time. The cook had a heavy butcher knife in his hand that he toyed with continually.

WHILE Rusty was eating, two men saddled horses and rode out to where the herd grazed on the river bottom. In a little while two others came in. They looked at Rusty with curiosity in their cold eyes, but asked no questions. Blaney or one of his men stood near Rusty all the time he was eating. He couldn't figure out why. They were six to his one, all heavily armed.

Rusty finished eating and was about to roll a smoke. He raised one hand toward his shirt pocket. The cook tossed a package of papers and a sack of tobacco across the table to him.

"Thanks." Rusty opened the papers and saw that the first one had been written on. He folded one side of the paper and began to sift the tobacco into it, reading the words: "*Don't leave camp. They will follow and kill you.*" Rusty read the warning a second time in order to make certain that he had made no mistake. He rolled the smoke and lighted it. His eyes, boring into the steel-gray ones across the table, saw no flinching, and strangely enough, no fear. The cook, a man of about forty-five, looked like he would be a tough bronc to scratch.

Rusty got up and took the nose bag off Tango. He spread his blanket on the ground and lay down on it, his head pillowed on his saddle. The men eyed him narrowly, but said nothing. After a while Blaney came over and squatted beside him. "Are you goin' into Waco?" he asked.

"I haven't made up my mind yet. You couldn't use a good man, could you?"

"I might, under certain conditions."

"Meanin'?"

"You're a stranger. I can't talk much to you yet, but since you say you came down the Brazos Valley, you must know the ford. If you want to go on with us, I'll make it worth your while."

"None of your men know the trail then?"

"No."

Rusty studied a moment. From the message the cook had given him, he was safer here than on the trail. His business in Waco could wait. He was glad he had not mentioned it; otherwise he would have had no show at all with these border toughs. "I'll stick," he said.

"All right then," Blaney said. "I'll pay you trail wages—forty and

prunes, and a bonus when we pen these dogies in Dodge."

Rusty nodded his acceptance. Blaney got up and went over to where the other men sat about a campfire. Rusty saw him talking to the two men that had come in from the herd. Each in turn gave Rusty the once-over. It was clear enough what was going on. Blaney was giving them the job of guarding the stranger, and they appeared fully capable of doing it.

Next morning, when the jingler brought in the remuda, Rusty was surprised to see the finest lot of saddle stock he had ever looked at. Blaney pointed to a black gelding, and told Rusty he could ride him that day.

Twice he attempted to get in a few words with the cook, but both times he was blocked by his guards. One of these men—they called him Dallas—was tall and dark, wore his hair long, his beard trimmed close. He look as if he knew how to use his tied-down gun. The other man, who answered to the name of Taylor, was slender, with blond hair and merciless blue eyes.

Rusty turned Tango into the remuda, and rode out toward the point of the herd, which numbered, he guessed, around a thousand head. The steers were all road branded with a Rafter L. A simple brand that could be run on with any sort of an iron. None of the original brands were familiar to him.

The cook drove the chuck wagon, and Rusty noticed that Blaney stayed back with the horse herd, which followed the wagon. Either Dallas or Taylor was always within a few jumps of Rusty. They gave him no instructions, asked for no assurance, but there was not the slightest doubt in Rusty's mind what would happen if he were to attempt to escape.

There was no clue as to the reason for the kindness that had been shown him by the cook, but Rusty worked on the theory that the older man was a prisoner like himself. He believed that the herd was stolen and that the cook had been picked up by Blaney, somewhere on one of his raids, and pressed into service. The thing that puzzled him more than anything was the fine saddle horses, all of them branded a Lazy K on the left shoulder. It was highly improbable that a bunch of cattle thieves, such as he believed Blaney and his men to be, could have gotten together any band of saddle stock, and to have stolen such a valuable herd from a cattle ranch would have stirred up a man hunt that would have reached from the Trinity to the Rio Grande.

Rusty decided to give no hint of a desire to get away. He played his part so well and acted so completely satisfied with his work, that he gained the confidence, to a certain extent, of Taylor. But Dallas never relaxed his vigilance for a moment.

FOR four days Rusty pointed the big herd north with all the skill of an experienced trail man. He had been forced to give up the idea of talking to the cook, until one night he got an unexpected break. Blaney was short-handed and had sent Rusty out with Taylor to take the first shift on guard, after the cattle had been bedded down. The evening was sultry and the cattle seemed restless and spooky.

Suddenly a coyote yelped from a nearby hackberry thicket. Half a dozen steers got up and trotted about nervously. This had happened on Rusty's side. He rode in quickly, quieting the cattle with his reassur-

ing croon. Taylor cantered around to see that all was well, leaving his own part of the herd unguarded.

What happened then, Rusty never knew, but the slightest unusual noise would have turned the trick. The sudden flushing of a prairie chicken, the scent of a swamp cat—anything. Without a moment's warning the steers were on their feet, and a fraction of a second later the stampede broke. The thunder of hoofs brought Blaney and all his men out. Rusty made a fast ride, turned the point and then took a short cut back to the camp.

The cook was leaning against a wagon, listening intently, when Rusty rode up.

"Better talk fast, old-timer," Rusty advised breathlessly. "This run won't last long. I turned the leaders before I quit 'em."

The old man straightened up. "I thought I read your face right or I wouldn't have written that note."

Rusty cautioned him with his hand. "Never mind that now. Let me do the talking, stop me if I'm wrong. Blaney stole the herd. He's leading it to Dodge to sell. He's not sure of a market. He stuck you up somehow and has been holding you prisoner. Tell me, quick, what I ought to know."

"My name is Knight," the cook answered tersely. "I own this saddle stock and outfit. The herd belongs to a bunch of Texas cowmen. I was driving it to Dodge to sell on commission. My cook got drunk and I fired him. I was driving the chuck wagon when Blaney's gang struck. They killed my foreman and scared the Mexican vaqueros I had brought from San Antonio so bad that they ran like rabbits. I saw that my only chance to live was to act like I was a poor, old broken-down cook. So far I've made it stick. If you can get away and get help I'll give you half of all I've got."

Rusty had been listening to the sounds. "The run is over. I've got to hurry. I'll have to ride around and made it look like I'd been with the herd all the time. If you want to tell me anything more, stick a note under the tailboard of the wagon. I'll look for it night and morning." He shot off at a run. When he saw an open place in the line, he reined his horse into it, as the herd began to mill.

Blaney came up to him. "Did you turn them leaders back?

"Yeah. I had a lot of luck."

"You did danged good work," Blaney praised him. "You're too smart a man to be workin' for wages."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Think it over. Do you happen to know any of the commission men in Dodge?"

"I've met some of 'em," Rusty admitted cautiously.

"When we get within a day's drive of the railroad, I'll let you go into town and see what sort of a deal you can make," Blaney told him. "Dallas or Taylor, mebbe both of 'em will go with you."

"What do I get if I sell 'em?"

"The boys split fifty percent of the pot. I take the rest. If you make a good deal without my havin' to go into town, I'll whack my share with you. I put up all the money for this play and worked it out. I'm entitled to the big cut."

"I'll think it over. Things are pretty tight in Dodge right now. There's been two or three stolen herds picked up by the officers."

TWO more days dragged on. Rusty realized that he must communicate in some way with Knight and let him know of Blaney's plan.

So far there had been no note left under the tailboard. No doubt the old man had decided it was too risky to attempt. Blaney stayed near the wagon night and day, for he dared not leave the cook without a guard. He might decide to kill Knight, as the best way to protect his own plans, Rusty thought.

About three o'clock that day, the herd was thrown off the trail onto a bottom land in a bend of the river. Taylor proposed that they all have a swim. A cold chill ran up Rusty's spine. So far he had guarded his secret perfectly, but he dared not strip in the presence of these men.

"I don't think I'll go in," he said. "I'll stick around while you have your swim."

Dallas laughed sarcastically. "You've been waitin' for just such a play as that. Wouldn't you like to have us all in the water with you sittin' out here holdin' our guns? Well, we're not that easy, feller. Come on, strip."

"All right," Rusty agreed. "Since you're afraid I'll start something I'll pile my gun with yours and go down stream a way and take off my clothes. If I feel like goin' in, I will."

The men could see nothing wrong with this proposal. Rusty rode downstream a short distance, left his horse standing, and began undressing. He pulled off his boots and shirt. Keeping an eye on the men, he quickly unbuckled a well-filled money belt and stuck it in one of his boots, then leisurely removed the rest of his clothing and piled it on top. He dove off into the stream, glad enough to have a swim, for the day had been hot and dusty. The feel of the water made him forget his danger for a moment, and when he glanced toward the shore again, he saw Knight swinging his team off the road, coming directly toward him. The cook was going to camp near the spot where Rusty had left his clothes. As usual, Blaney rode near the wagon. Rusty realized that he was in a precarious situation. It would be impossible for him to dress under the watchful eye of Blaney without disclosing the belt. He swam downstream a few yards, trying to think up some trick that would divert Blaney's attention, but failed. Knight stopped the team and began unhitching the horses. Blaney sat down within a yard of Rusty's clothes and pulled off his boots.

"How's the water, cold?" he called to Rusty.

"No, it's fine."

"Why didn't you go in with the other boys."

"Dallas was afraid to take off his guns while I was on the bank," Rusty explained.

Blaney glanced back at Knight. "I guess Dallas ain't so dumb at that. I'll wait for my swim until he or Taylor comes."

Rusty cautioned him quietly. Knight's actions. He was delaying the work of unhitching the horses, and at the same time keeping a sharp lookout in the direction of the cottonwoods at the edge of the bottom land. Once Rusty was certain he saw the old man raise his hand, as if giving a signal to someone back in the timber. Then he turned and, after making sure that Blaney's back was toward him, beckoned to Rusty.

Rusty circled around, making his way toward the shore. Again Knight signaled frantically to him to hurry, and this time Blaney saw him. He jumped to his feet, drawing his gun to cover Knight.

"What's goin' on here?" he demanded suspiciously. "What are you two up to?"

By this time Rusty was on the bank, but he remembered now that

his gun was in the pile, fifty yards away. Blaney's gun cracked and Knight fell heavily. At that moment Rusty heard the pound of hoofs from the direction of the timber, and looked around the rear of the wagon. A posse of rangers were charging toward the river!

Blaney looked around wildly to see if he had any chance of escape. When he realized he was surrounded he threw down his gun. Some of the rangers raced upstream to get the guns of the other men. They could not have hoped for a more perfect coup.

Rusty had run to his clothes and succeeded in getting the money belt around his waist, when one of the rangers saw him, and rushed over to grab it away from him.

"Hey, sarge, look here," he called to the officer in charge. "A belt full of yellow boys! We've made a bigger haul than we figured on. This must be the gang that held up the La Bette County Bank."

The sergeant directed the man to take the money, and when Rusty had dressed ordered irons put on him.

YOU'RE lucky, at that," the talkative ranger told him, "we all saw Blaney kill Knight, so at least you won't have to stand trial for his murder, except as an accomplice."

"You knew that this was Knight's herd?" Rusty asked.

"Sure. He managed to get hold of a couple of the Indians that had stampeded these steers. He gave 'em ten dollars apiece to bring a note to the nearest ranger station."

"So that was what made the steers run. I never could figure that out."

"Yeah, some of these bucks are pretty smart. They've learned that all the men rush out to stop a stampede; so they start one, then rob the grub boxes in the camp. Knight had been over this trail before and knew some of the Indians."

Some of the rangers remained with the herd, while the rest took Blaney's gang and Rusty to the nearest town and put them in jail.

When Rusty asked the sergent to let him tell his story, the officer shook his head. "Can't do it, kid. You're a member of a gang we've been after for months, and from what we've seen of you, we think you're the brains of the outfit."

"All right then, if there's a lawyer in this town send him in here to me. And, believe me, you're passing up a chance to make a name for yourself."

"Meanin'?" the officer demanded.

"I thought you didn't want to listen."

"Well, it's against orders, but—"

"Did you count the money in my belt?" Rusty asked him.

"Uh-huh. Ten thousand, we found."

"Don't it seem a little strange to you that tough hombres like Blaney and Dallas would have let me carry all the money?"

"That's why we're sure you're the boss of the gang. You couldn't have had that much money on you in a camp like that, unless you had 'em all buffaloed. No, you're the one we want worst of all, and you can't talk your way out of it."

"Maybe not," Rusty admitted. "And the only man who knew the truth was killed."

"You mean Knight?"

"Sure."

"What could he have known about it?"

"Listen, soldier, Knight was a prisoner in his own camp. I stumbled onto 'em by accident, and before I realized the sort of bunch they were, I was too much involved to back up.

They were making Knight do the cooking for them. He smuggled me a note, warning me that if I tried to leave they'd follow and kill me. I stuck with 'em, looking for a chance to get away and go for help, but Blaney set two men to guard me."

"How come you was riding the range alone with all that dough on you?"

"My name is Richard Stevens. I'm from Dodge. Folks call me Rusty account of my hair. I'm a cattle buyer myself. I was on the trail to Waco to close a deal when I got in this mess."

"You say Knight knew all of this."

"No. Knight only knew that I wasn't in with Blaney and that I was trying to help him."

"A likely story," grunted the sergeant and walked out. But next morning shortly after sunup he came back to the jail with two officers. They released Rusty from his cell and told him to select his own outfit and put it on a horse. Rusty supposed he was to be taken somewhere for further questionng and was much surprised when they headed back for the camp where the tragedy had occurred. He asked no questions, however. They rode past the herd which was grazing under the protection of troopers and on to the camp. Two men sat by the chuck wagon, one of them a ranger.

Rusty rubbed his eyes, and took another look, then slid off his horse and went on, holding out his hand to the man who sat leaning against the wagon wheel.

"Gosh, Mr. Knight, I'm glad they didn't get you," he exclaimed.

"Hello, Rusty," the cattleman said cordially. "I guess my skull is pretty thick. And, anyway, Blaney's bullet went too high. I've been wondering what became of you. If the rangers hadn't brought you out, I was coming into town as soon as I felt able to ride."

Rusty rode back with the rangers and picked up enough riders to trail the herd into Dodge. When the cattle were sold, Knight insisted on splitting the profits. He suggested also that Rusty join him in buying another herd.

"That suits me fine," Rusty replied. "I've been delayed so long that the cattle I expected to buy in Waco have been sold, but, anyway, I've made better wages than Blaney offered me."

"How much were you supposed to get?" asked Knight.

"Forty and prunes," and Rusty chuckled. "But I've done a heap better than that!"

THE END

THE STORY OF THE WEST

told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

The term "ranger" as applied to a military unit was probably first used when Roger's Rangers scoured the country away back during the French and Indian War.

In 1832, during the Black Hawk War in Illinois, Congress passed an act providing for a battalion of mounted "Rangers" of six companies, with one hundred officers and privates to each company. Enlistment was for one year. There was no regular uniform provided and each man dressed to suit himself.

These Rangers, after being assembled at Fort Gibson in Oklahoma, were given orders to scour the country between the Canadian and the Red Rivers and drive west any Comanches or Pawnees they found. The force left the Fort on May 7th, 1833.

Day after day the long march continued with never a Comanche in sight. Day after day the horses plodded steadily onward till on June the second, they neared the Red River between the Washita and the Blue Rivers. This was still in Oklahoma.

Having found no redskins, the men's vigilance had become somewhat lax. Men wandered off to the side at will or stayed behind at some spring for a last cool drink before taking up the march again.

George Abbay, one of the Rangers, was one of these. Stopping for a moment on the bank of the Washita before overtaking his company, his eyes caught the movement of a shadow at his feet and he looked up to find himself covered by a countless number of drawn bows in the hands of hideously painted Comanches, who had quietly stepped out of concealment and now surrounded him.

Helpless, he was at once seized by a dozen warriors. His arms were stripped from him and he was thrown on a horse and securely tied. Quickly the Indians mounted and, leading Abbay's mount, crossed the Washita in a cloud of splashing foam, just as the entire force of Rangers, suddenly aware of the situation, charged back in a futile attempt to rescue Abbay. The Comanches with their prisoner reached the other bank safely and the whole band of some one hundred and fifty or two hundred disappeared in a thunder of hoofs on the opposite side.

The whole expedition now joined in the pursuit of the redskins. But the horses of the Indians were fresh and swift and they not only held their lead, but drew away from the whites, and finally disappeared from view beyond the hills in a high cloud of dust.

For twelve long, hopeless days the troops continued their westerly pursuit of the Comanches while their horses fell by the wayside in sheer exhaustion. At last, passing beyond the range of the buffalo and with their food supply used up, they were forced to turn back. They were now so worn out that the whole original project of the expedition had to be abandoned and the troop returned to Fort Gibson in July. Abbay, it was subsequently learned, was killed by his captors at a point south of the Red River.

Altogether the Ranger organization proved to be of little value. The men were really undisciplined mounted free-lance fighters, and so conducted themselves. Though of unquestioned individual courage, as a military unit they were proved to be unsatisfactory.

In 1833, by act of Congress, the Rangers were supplanted by a regiment of dragoons with whom the Rangers were merged. Major Henry Dodge was placed in command of this regiment. Later five more companies of dragoons were recruited in the Eastern States and concentrated at Jefferson Barracks in Missouri. They were then marched the five hundred miles to augment the garrison at Fort Gibson.

No doubt there were a goodly number of the old Ranger force included in Dodge's company of dragoons and it may be safely said that, uncontrolled rough spirits as they were, and brief as was their existence as a military unit, the United States Rangers played their part in making the frontier safe for trade and commerce.

NEXT WEEK:
LEAVENWORTH'S EXPEDITION

Although they lacked the discipline that would have welded them into an effective fighting force, the Rangers played a part in making the frontier safe for travel.

TRAP PIRATES' ROUNDUP

BY JOSEPH F. HOOK

The night was as black as the inside of a wolf's mouth, ideal for raiding a floater salmon trap. Wind shrieked through the rigging and troller-pole gear of the *Cohoe*. High waves smashed shudderingly against the sturdy hull, trying to beat the craft back over her course. She wallowed deep in the trough, then rose to the powerful thrust of her propeller and chunking engine, to shoot down the foaming slope of the next wave with the speed of an arrow.

Young Pete Gordon and Boom Hacker emerged from the darkened pilot house in oilskins, carrying hammer, nails and a strip of canvas. Gordon held Hacker's legs while the latter leaned over the bow and nailed the strip across the troller's name. Waves broke over the two men, ice-cold water chilled by Alaskan glaciers and the wind that roared through the straits.

The men re-entered the pilot house with water dripping from their oilskins and sou'westers. Standing in a spreading pool on the floor, Hacker took the night glasses and swept the water for signs of the bureau of fisheries' cutter or a salmon-trap company patrol boat.

Presently he picked up the feeble yellow anchor light on the floater trap, and handed the glasses to the skipper, Jake Andrus, while Gordon took over the wheel. After a minute, Andrus handed the night glasses back, and nodded.

"That's her," he said laconically. His black eyes were snapping and his jaws rigid as he took the wheel again with powerful hands, nursing the *Cohoe* ahead carefully. The yellow trap light gleamed more plainly as the craft approached it. Hacker went aft to the galley and returned with Louden.

Waves were lifting the log frame of the trap and tilting it. The thousands of milling salmon within the webbing created a maelstrom of phosphorescent light. The skipper's black eyes lighted with satisfaction. About twenty thousand captive salmon, he calculated at a glance. The first salmon of the season, with the market price high.

Gordon and Hacker tossed bow and stern lines over the outside log of the floater, then leaped from the deck of the troller to the trap. Landing on the surging log, they made fast the lines. Jim Louden took his station at the brailer winch over the well, waiting.

When the *Cohoe's* fenders were rubbing against the log frame, Andrus stepped onto the trap. Accompanied by Hacker, he proceeded cautiously along the pitching footboards toward the cabin at the far end. Both men put a shoulder against the door and pushed it inward. The beam from Hacker's flashlight swept in a circle, coming to rest on the bunk where the trap watchman lay.

The man sat up, blinking, eyes wide with surprise. He started to say something at the sight of the gun in Andrus' hand, changed his mind and reached under the pillow for his own. The skipper's gun roared deafeningly in the narrow confines of the cabin,

and the watchman fell back on the pillow, an ugly hole in his forehead.

ONLY the hiss and roar of the waves pounding against the floater trap was heard as the salmon pirates made their way back to the webbing to help Gordon heave it up and clew each portion gained on the cross planks spanning the trap. The heavy tarred cord cut their fingers, broke their nails, and the salt water got into the cuts, smarting them. They grunted, heaved and cursed when the wet webbing slipped through numbed fingers. But at last they got the back of the net clewed up and the captive salmon in the bunt of it.

Loudon, peering through the darkness, promptly threw in the clutch. The winch responded with a clatter. The boom, with dangling brailer, swung outboard and was lowered over the bunt. Hacker grasped the long pole handle and plunged the brailer deep down among the close-packed, lashing salmon.

The engine throbbed as the boom and loaded brailer was raised and

Gordon's vicious swing took the skipper by surprise and sent him sprawling!

swung inboard. Gordon, standing aft of the well, jerked the trip rope. The bottom of the pursed brailer opened, and a silver stream cascaded into the well. Living silver—salmon!

The *Cohoe's* stern was low and her bow high by the time Andrus signaled a halt. The load of salmon was flush with the well coaming. Fish gurry made walking treacherous on the heaving deck as the men cast off the bow and stern lines.

The heavy load of fish made the *Cohoe* logy as she came around into the teeth of the storm. Once clear of the lee of the trap, the waves leaped at her, splitting themselves on her sharp bow, flinging their hoary crests aft in a smother of foam.

Andrus' bawled orders reached the crew above the shrieking wind in the mast rigging.

"Get the trollin'-pole lines on deck and tangle 'em up like the'd been used hard," he yelled. "Drag 'em around in the gurry, too, and kink the wire leaders. Rip the canvas strip off the boat's name first. Them fellers from the bureau of fisheries has eyes like hawks."

Boom Hacker entered the pilot house with Pete Gordon later on and picked up the night glasses, sweeping the vast area of blackness for sign of the fisheries cutter or a company patrol boat. He watched until the eastern horizon was laced with threads of dawn.

Louden brought coffee and hot cake into the pilot house and the men ate hungrily. The tension of night relaxed. The straits were still turbulent, but the gale had eased somewhat. Conversation, for the first time since pirating the salmon trap, became easy and unstrained.

After eating, Hacker again picked up the binoculars and adjusted them to his eyes.

"Looks like a floating cannery offn the port bow, skipper," he announced. "Is that her?"

"Yeah, that's the one," Andrus answered. "That's where we cash in. She's an independent outfit and don't care where she buys her salmon so long as she gets plenty to can."

The crew of the floating cannery lined the rail as the *Cohoe* came alongside and made fast. The manager's eyes gleamed with satisfaction when he saw the full well.

"That's some catch," he called down to Andrus. "The first of the season, and the price is high. Seventeen cents. How about it?"

"You've bought a cargo of fish," the skipper agreed.

The cannery ship's boom swung out and the brailer was lowered. Andrus climbed the Jacob's ladder and stood beside the manager.

"Out of Vancouver?" the latter inquired.

"Yeah," Andrus lied glibly. The *Cohoe* was registered in Seattle, but he had found out in Vancouver that there was a *Cohoe* registered in that city, and had altered his clearance papers accordingly in case the Canadian fisheries bureau cutters got curious as to his port of registry.

"Must have kept your crew pretty busy while the salmon were striking," the manager observed, as the first brailer load of fish came aboard.

Andrus held out a pair of hands lacerated by the trap webbing and swollen by the salt water getting into the sores.

"The rest of the crew have worse hands than mine," he said. "You got anything to drink aboard?"

THE manager led the way to his cabin and produced a bottle and glasses. The two men talked quietly about fishing until the cannery ship's foreman reported the *Cohoe's* well

empty. The manager made a note of the foreman's count and started to pay the skipper in cash.

"Wait a minute," the skipper said. "Take the price out of that dough for about fifty gallons of gas, if you got it to spare, and a coupla bottles of likker."

"I'll have to go and take a look at our store of gas," the manager told him. "If you weren't so far from a supply base, I'd have to refuse you. We need what we have on hand for our tenders."

When he went out with his foreman, Andrus emptied his glass, then relaxed with a smile. "Far from a supply base, huh?" he muttered. "You're danged tootin' I am—on purpose."

"I can spare fifty," the manager announced on his return. "The foreman's passing the hose down to your troller now." He lowered his voice. "About the liquor. I wrapped you up a couple of bottles, but it's against the law. Keep it under your hat, or I'll get into trouble."

Andrus winked at him, picked up the package and left the cabin. The manager accompanied him to the ladder.

"I suppose you'll be remembering us when you make your next haul," he said.

"You can expect me back any day," the skipper assured him. Then he went over the side and climbed down to the deck of the *Cohoe*, where Louden, Gordon, and Hacker were hosing off the gurry and untangling the troller-pole lines. Andrus started the engine and waved a hand to the cannery ship crew lining the rail. The lines were cast off and the pseudo troller chugged away.

"That's doin' it the easy way," Andrus grinned, when the rest of the crew came into the pilot house. He peeled bills off the fat roll of currency and handed each man his share. "Ain't you glad now you throwed in with us, Gordon?"

"Sure am," Gordon said heartily. "I've trolled a whole season and not earned that much. Where we going now, skipper?"

"We're goin' after big game this time. The last one was just a sort o' start, to get our hands in. There's one twice as big, in Sooke Inlet. I got a list of 'em all. Break open a bottle, somebody, and let's celebrate."

"How far is that?" Gordon inquired.

"Sooke Inlet? Oh, it ain't far, by the chart, but it's plenty far the way we're goin'. We'll keep out o' the main lane of traffic, so's we don't run into no cutters or company patrol boats. The less they see of us, the less apt they are to suspect us."

"Is that why you laid in the extry fifty gallons of gas, skipper?"

"You're catchin' on, Gordon. By the time the season's over, you'll be a real salmon-trap pirate like me and Louden and Hacker."

Gordon took a long pull at the bottle when it came his turn.

"If it's a big trap," he said speculatively, "there'll be more'n one watchman."

Andrus eyed him for a long moment. "Yeah," he replied. "Mebbe two. Mebbe more'n two. But who the hell cares? That's the least of our worries."

"Yeah, that's right," Gordon echoed. "Yeah, that's the least of our worries, skipper."

The drinking began in earnest and continued while the *Cohoe* shoved along down the straits. The gale was now a mere whisper in the mast rigging, the swells easy to ride. They passed trollers and purse seiners at work and jeered when the lines re-

mained taut or the huge nets were pursed and winched aboard with little in them.

"That's the way we used to do it, eh, skipper?" Hacker laughed.

"Yeah, the hard way," Andrus said, grinning. "Them days is behind us now." He spun the wheel over. "Gettin' too well populated with boats around here. Me for the inlets."

The *Cohoe* rode through the entrance of the first one on a skookum chuck tide that raced through the narrow passage like a river. In and out among the myriad islands the boat threaded its way. Laughter and song echoed from the pilot house as the liquor passed from hand to hand.

Gordon drank heavily, and after a short while his speech became thick, his eyes inflamed. At last Andrus snatched the bottle from him.

"You've had enough," he said firmly. "That ain't water, feller. Besides, you gotta have a clear head by the time we reach the next trap."

"That's right, skipper," Gordon said vaguely. "Gotta have a clear head to handle them watchmen, huh?"

Andrus eyed him. "You seem to have watchmen on the brain, Gordon. Hacker, take him to the cabin and boost him into a bunk."

The water flattened out in a dead calm, through which the *Cohoe* moved steadily toward its destination, avoiding the straits until about an hour before sunset. Then Andrus swung the wheel over and rode the outgoing chuck into the straits.

"Take a trick," he said to Hacker. "Keep her headed north by east at that speed and we'll make it to the trap nicely by dark. I'm goin' to get a coupla hours' shut-eye. Louden, you use them glasses plenty, and if you spot a cutter or comp'ny patrol boat, let Hacker know in plenty of time so's he can give her a wide berth. I don't want none of them nosy guys to look us over too close."

AS he started aft the engine coughed, then abruptly died. There was a hammering silence for a moment as the men in the pilot house glanced at one another in questioning surprise.

"Well, that's funny," Hacker observed, releasing the wheel. "That's the first time the engine's quit on us." He joined Andrus outside, and both started aft with Louden following. At that moment Pete Gordon stepped out of the cabin, slightly sobered.

"What's the matter with the engine?" he asked.

Nobody answered him. The men descended into the engine room, stood regarding the motionless mass of steel for a moment. Gordon remained on deck, listening to what the men said, there being no room for him in the small quarters mostly taken up by the hot engine.

"The port tank was about empty and I switched to the starboard tank just before handin' the wheel over to you, Hacker," Andrus declared. "Reckon the line's plugged?"

Hacker was tinkering with the carburetor. "No, she's full," he replied. "Mebbe it's the—"

"Look!" The men straightened, staring up through the hatch. "There's a cutter coming like hell!"

Three heads poked up above the hatch coaming, and three pairs of eyes glanced astern. Even at that distance there was no mistaking that long, gray craft, her sharp bow throwing up a pair of white fans.

"It's a fisheries cutter!" Louden exclaimed.

There was silence for a moment,

and then the three heads ducked below again. Hacker spun the flywheel until sweat dripped into his eyes, but no answering explosion came. Louden relieved him, his powerful muscles bulging his shirt as he spun the heavy wheel. He stepped away, panting, and Andrus took a turn. Gordon looked nervous, his glance traveling between the laboring men below and the approaching cutter.

"You'll hafta hurry!" he called down to them. "She's overhauling us fast!"

"What do we care?" Andrus demanded irritably. "What's eatin' you, Gordon? You got the jitters just because there's a cutter on our tail?"

Gordon's voice held a note of fear. "It's sort o' queer. Us breaking down and that cutter heaving in sight. You reckon they're wise to something, skipper? They could've found that watchman by now."

Andrus ignored him. With an oath, he grabbed a wrench and tackled the feed-line valve from the starboard tank. The union came loose and he parted the thin copper piping. Liquid ran over his hands. He plugged the pipe with a finger and smelled at his other hand.

"Water!" he snarled. "That dirty rat on the cannery ship's done sold us watered gas!"

The silence that followed was punctured by the steady drumming of the approaching cutter's powerful engines. Andrus removed his finger from the end of the feed line. Water trickled over his hands, formed a pool on the engine-room floor, trickled away into the bilge. Every few moments he plugged the pipe and smelled his hand.

"It's gas now!" he cried at last, connecting the pipes and screwing up the union. "Louden, you got that carburetor emptied? All right, Hacker, give the wheel a twist."

Again they frantically spun the heavy flywheel, but the engine remained silent. Exhausted, they leaned against the wall.

"Let's get forward to the pilot house," Andrus gasped finally. "We could get help from that cutter, but I ain't lettin' them brass-bound babies look me over."

WHEN they climbed on deck, Gordon was standing there, eyes riveted on the cutter. He was trembling with fear. Cursing him, Andrus shoved him into the pilot house.

"What's the matter with you, you fool?" he growled.

"They're coming right for us!" Gordon cried nervously. "They're wise!"

"You're imaginin' things, Gordon. Shut up!"

"No, I ain't imaginin' things," Gordon cried, his voice rising. "I've got a hunch they're after us. I'm—"

The skipper's fist cracked against his jaw and he went down in a heap, rolled over and struggled to his hands and knees. Andrus calmly picked up the binoculars and studied the cutter intently. She was fully a mile away, plainer now, her bow wave higher. Across the still water the throb of her engines sounded like the roll of many drums.

Hacker and Louden kept their gaze riveted upon her. Gordon shook his head, struggled slowly, groggily to his feet, and leaned for support against the wheel. Blood trickled down his chin from a pair of split lips. With fear-distended eyes, he glanced over the men's shoulders at the cutter.

"Looks like she's bearing directly down on us," Hacker said quietly.

"Matter of routine," Louden

argued, trying to keep his voice calm. "Going to give us the once-over. I've seen 'em do it before."

"Listen," Andrus said warningly, "if them sea cookies is suspicious of us, they'll come aboard. Now remember what I'm tellin' you. Especially you, Gordon, you white-livered louse. If they board us, I'll do all the talkin', see?"

"They've got the goods on us, I tell you!" Gordon was half screaming now. "And you're to blame for it, skipper. You lied to get me to throw in with you. You said you'd bribe the trap watchmen, not murder them! You croaked that last one. I heard the shot. We'll all swing for it! Damn you, I—"

Louden grabbed him and clamped a broad palm over his mouth.

"Stow that shouting!" he rasped. "Sound carries a long ways over water. You wanna put 'em wise?"

Gordon struggled frantically to break Louden's hold and ceased only when Hacker rammed a gun hard against his ribs and held it there.

"We gotta shut him up, and quick!" Hacker said over his shoulder to the skipper. "If we don't close his trap—"

"Lay off that, Hacker," Andrus interposed harshly. "If them cookies board us and find a corpse, our goose is cooked. And it's too late to dump him overboard. They'd see us from the cutter. Lemme at him."

He stepped over to Gordon, his hands balled into hard fists. Gordon cringed back against the wall, eyes glowing wildly like a cornered animal. Then, suddenly, he struck out desperately. Andrus walked into the blow with his guard down. A look of profound surprise filled his eyes as the wild swing cracked against his temple. He staggered back under the impact of the blow, tripped over the pilot-house door coaming and fell flat on the deck outside.

Louden and Hacker leaped on Gordon, crushing him to the floor, avoiding his flailing fists and pinioning his arms and legs. There was murder in the skipper's black eyes as he got to his feet. He stepped over the coaming, cursing, and then stopped abruptly. The loud drumming of the cutter's engine had ceased.

He shot a glance over his shoulder. The cutter was less than a hundred yards astern, its high bow wave now no more than a ripple. Her crew lined the rail, some with boat hooks, ready to board the *Cohoe* the moment she came alongside.

"On your feet, all of you!" Andrus ordered harshly. His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper as the men scrambled to their feet. "Listen, Gordon," he said, "I'll be standin' alongside you when they come aboard. Open your mouth and I'll let you have it through the guts! You're hollerin' before you're hurt. They ain't got nothin' on us."

THE cutter's bow was now even with the *Cohoe's* stern and boat hooks were stretched out to grip her gunwale. The bell in the engine room rang, and the cutter's propeller spun in reverse. It rang again and the engine was silent. Then the pilot-house door opened and the commander of the cutter stepped on deck.

"Make fast!" he sang out.

As the boat hooks sank into the wood of the *Cohoe's* gunwale, the commander stepped down on to the troller's deck, followed by half his crew. Andrus leaned against the pilot-house door frame in an assumed attitude of listless curiosity.

"Who's in charge of this troller?" the commander asked.

"Reckon I am," Andrus replied evenly. He expected the next demand would be to show his papers. Well, that had all been taken care of before.

"Engine trouble, eh?" was the next question.

Andrus didn't try to keep the cynical note from his voice. These bumptuous sea cookies were a pain in the neck.

"You didn't think we was just wallerin' around here for the fun of it, did you? Sure, I got engine trouble. How did you ever suspect it?"

The commander's eyes weighed him. "I didn't suspect it," he said finally. "I knew it. You've got a tankful of watered gasoline. The foreman of the cannery ship you sold your salmon to did that."

The belligerent expression faded from Andrus' face and the blood drained from his cheeks. "He—what?" he said in a half snarl.

"You heard me," the commander replied, as his crew moved in solidly behind him. "Acting under orders from the manager, the foreman pumped a little gas and a lot of water into your starboard fuel tank. He figured we'd be along some time today and that you'd be lying becalmed, somewhere in the straits, trying to find out what ailed your engine. You're all under arrest for murder and salmon-trap piracy."

There was dismay and desperation written on the faces of the men in the pilot house. Suddenly Andrus' eyes narrowed and he dropped a hand to his coat pocket. The commander's fist clipped him on the jaw and, at the same instant, two hard heads butted him in a flying tackle, driving him back against the men in the pilot house.

Several of the cutter's crew catapulted through the doorway in a wild surge. The skipper's hurtling body knocked Louden and Hacker down. The next moment the pilot house was a tangle of thrashing arms and legs, a bedlam of curses and thudding fists.

Gordon, pinned against the pilot-house wall by the weight of bodies, glanced around wildly. Standing in the doorway, blocking the only avenue of escape, stood the cutter's commander, cool and collected, watching the outcome of the struggle inside. With a cry of terror, Gordon suddenly tore his legs loose from the mass of fighting, struggling men and took a flying header through the pilot-house window.

He hit the deck running, leaped again and went overboard. Fear

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You, too, may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you, too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 9, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use, too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 9, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

lent strength and speed to his arms as he struck out for the shore.

THE commander barked an order. A bell rang in the cutter's engine room and boat hooks were withdrawn from the *Cohoe's* gunwale. The long, gray craft seemed to leap out of the water as her propeller churned it to foam. Boat hooks fastened in Gordon's clothes and he was yanked aboard unceremoniously.

Once more the cutter made fast to the *Cohoe*. Now the fight was over. Bleeding, clothes in ribbons, Andrus, Louden and Hacker were roughly hauled off the troller and on to the cutter, searched and their guns taken from them.

"Take them into my cabin," the commander ordered. He watched until the *Cohoe* was taken in tow and then stepped inside.

"I'll talk, mister!" Gordon cried out. "These guys talked me into—"

"You don't have to talk, young man," the commander cut it. "All you've got to do is listen while I do the talking. There were too many sharp eyes aboard that cannery ship to see through your bluff of tangled troll lines and paint scraped off the gurdies. You might have gotten away with it at that if it hadn't been for one oversight—a fatal one on your part."

"Yeah?" Andrus sneered. "And what was that?"

"You forgot to plug the nail holes where you tacked canvas over the troller's name," the commander replied. "The foreman of the cannery ship and two of the crew noticed that. When the manager left the cabin to see how much gas he could spare you, the foreman put him wise. Then they took a look at the salmon. Not one showed a hook mark—another sad mistake, my lads. It clinched the suspicion that you were trap pirates and led to the idea of the watered gas.

"The moment you were out of sight, the manager hoisted the distress signal. It was seen on shore and somebody wired Port Hardy where my cutter happened to be refueling. I'd have overhauled you sooner, but I had to make a run to the cannery ship to find out what the trouble was, then make another run to the nearest trap to verify the suspicion. What I found in the bunk is going to hang you fellows."

He turned then and faced Gordon. "Now what was it you wanted to say?" he asked.

Gordon tried to moisten his lips with a tongue that had suddenly gone dry.

"N-nothing," he said dully. "Nothing—now. You've said it all!"

THE END

JUDGE COLT—MAN BREAKER

BY GUNNISON STEELE

ALL evening a dark, restless cloud mass had clogged the horizon up beyond the Bitter Roots, mute warning of the fierce blizzard that was brooding. Now, with the coming of night, the cloud masses had lifted with a low moaning sound and swirled southward. Screaming gusts of icy wind were sweeping the Wyoming uplands, bringing a drift of sleety snow.

The blizzard winds hammered and roared like an enraged giant around Hook Scaffee's big Crooked T ranchhouse. Except for a sliver of light at the bottom of a shaded window, the house itself was dark, but plenty of light glowed from the windows of the bunkhouse fifty yards away, and above the rant of the storm sounded the boisterous, drunken revelry of Hook Scaffee's tough riders.

Through bitter, pain-numbed eyes young Johnny Silvers saw these things. The blizzard had struck twenty minutes before, when he was yet a mile out on the plain. Almost instantly the icy wind had cut through his thin clothing, to the very bone. It had frozen the blood that was seeping from the bullet wound just above his knee, intensifying the fierce pain that for two days and nights had hammered at his weary body.

But, driven by a calm, set deter-

mination, Johnny Silvers had limped on despite that pain. On nerve alone he'd made it to the Crooked T.

When he got there he was almost frozen to death. He was weak and sick with pain and weariness. His wounded leg was swollen tight in his boot. But he didn't show himself. That would have been like a wounded deer blundering among a pack of hungry wolves.

A moment before, Johnny Silvers had peered through the crack in the blind that screened the ranchhouse window. Inside the warm, richly-furnished room was Hook Scaffee. A big, red-haired man with ruthless power and greed stamped indelibly on his cruel hawkish features, Scaffee sat at a shiny-topped desk, pencil and paper and a whiskey bottle before him. He was alone in the room.

After leaving the window, Johnny Silvers leaned for a moment against the wall, fighting the pain and weakness that held him. The wind screamed and slashed at him, the sleet cut at his lean, freckled features. Johnny knew that unless he got inside a warm room he couldn't stay on his feet more than a few minutes longer.

He eased around the big old ranchhouse and crossed the wide porch to a closed door. The door was unlocked, and he slipped through into a dark hallway. A few feet away he could see a second sliver of light which he knew came from under the door to the room Hook Scaffee was in. Gun in hand, his eyes bitter and cold in the darkness, Johnny crept to the door.

Then, suddenly, he flung his shoulder against the door. Unlocked, the door slammed inward, propelling him into the room. Quickly he regained his balance, stood braced on wide-spread legs, gun outthrust.

HOOK SCAFFEE pivoted in his chair, yellow eyes flared wide with surprise, one hand stabbing to a desk drawer and slamming it open. Then he seemed to freeze. Rocklike jaw hanging slack, he stared at Johnny Silvers as if he were seeing a ghost. His fingers twitched nervously over the open desk drawer.

"Just take it easy, Scaffee," Johnny Silvers advised bleakly, "and mebbe you won't get hurt!"

Some of the surprise left Scaffee's eyes and was supplanted by cunning. In Johnny Silvers' haggard, burning eyes he saw death for himself if he moved wrong. He saw the fatigue and hunger on Johnny's face, saw him sway on legs that threatened to buckle.

"You sort of took me by surprise, Silvers," Scaffee said softly. "What's the gun for?"

"You'll find out, damn quick, if you don't do as I say," Johnny grated. "Take your hand away from that drawer!"

Scaffee's hand dropped back to his lap. Johnny stepped forward, lifted a snub-nosed .38 six-gun from the drawer and flung it across the room into a corner. Then he again backed away, watching Scaffee warily.

Johnny's wounded leg made a dragging, slithering sound on the floor as he backed away. Scaffee's gaze flicked briefly to the stiff, blood-soaked leg, and the crafty light came again to his yellow eyes.

"You're hurt, Silvers," he said, almost purring.

"Shot," Johnny nodded tautly. "It happened when I broke out o' the pen two days ago. A guard winged me. I tried to bandage it, but I didn't have anything to work with, no disinfectant or medicine. It's in a bad way, you can see that. For two days and nights I've been on the move, Scaffee—runnin' dodgin', hid-

in'—with just one thought in my mind: To reached the Crooked T and you."

Hook Scaffee looked sympathetic. "That's swell, Silvers," he said smoothly. "Now that you're here, you're safe. You won't need that gun. Put it up; you're among friends."

"Yeah, you're my friend," Johnny said with caustic sarcasm. "The same kind of friend you were when you framed me into the pen two years ago!"

"I don't get you—"

"You get me, all right," Johnny said harshly. "Blast you, Scaffee, I didn't break out o' the pen to be a hunted man for the rest of my life. I broke out for just one thing: To make you sign a confession, admittin' you framed me. If you don't, you're a dead man!"

Hook Scaffee licked lips that seemed suddenly dry. "You're crazy, Silvers. I allus sort of liked you. I know we quarreled some. But men have their differences."

"You framed me," Johnny Silvers went on relentlessly. "You wanted my little Star O outfit; you wanted me out of the way, and you figured framin' me into the pen was just as easy as killin' me, and a lot safer."

"You're crazy," Scaffee said again. "You got no proof—"

Johnny Silvers nodded. "That's right, Scaffee; I haven't any proof. If I did have, I wouldn't be here now; I'd let the law handle you. But I don't have to have proof to know you were behind that stage robbery and killin' that I was sentenced to the pen for. I savvy just how it happened, even if I can't prove it. You picked a day when you knew I was up in the hills alone, chousin' strays. Then you sent one of your riders to steal my black geldin', Nero, from the corral. When the stage was robbed a couple hours later over in Mulejaw Canyon, and the driver shot down in cold blood, one of the bandits was ridin' Nero. This hombre wore a mask, but he was about my size, and talked a lot like me. Then, when Sheriff Ford rode out from Wolf Point to investigate, he found a tally book on the ground that had my name and tallies in it—the tally book, Scaffee, that you'd stolen from a desk drawer at the Star O a little while before. Does all that jolt your memory?"

"It proves you're crazy as hell," Scaffee sneered. "Why would I do all them things?"

"I told you, so I'd be out of the way. You got a shipment of bank money that was on the stage, and got rid of me, at the same time. Sheriff Ford trailed the geldin' back to the Star O, found him in the corral, sweaty from a hard ride. That clinched the case against me. A jury sentenced me to the pen for twenty years. And I was innocent, Scaffee. You know that. If you didn't really help rob that stage, you planned it. You could clear me. And you'll do it, damn you—or I'll blow you apart!"

SCAFFEE sat hunched forward over his ornate desk, the savagery in his yellow eyes not quite veiled by the sympathy he was trying to convey as he looked at Johnny Silvers. His gaze flicked from Johnny's stiff, swollen leg to his gaunt, pain-lined face. He could see that Johnny was about ready to drop from exhaustion. And he could see the bitter hate and desperation in the young cowman's eyes.

"No use goin' off half-cocked, Silvers," he said soothingly. "You need rest, an' that leg needs doctorin'."

"That can wait," said Johnny. "Mebbe this other won't. The whole

country's on the lookout for me. Sheriff Ford might figure I was headed for here, aimin' to kill you; he might happen up any minute. I went through hell to get here, to get that confession. There's a pencil and paper on the desk, Scaffee; start writin'! And it won't do you no good to listen for yore gunnies. Long as their rotgut lasts they won't leave the bunkhouse."

Scaffee frowned. Unconsciously, he had been straining his ears for some sound above the hammering squall of the blizzard. He knew Johnny was right. He could expect no help from his tough gunhands.

Scaffee's desperate gaze flicked about the room—to the gleaming .38 Colt lying in a corner where Johnny Silvers had tossed it. Scaffee knew he could never reach that gun before bullets from Johnny Silvers' gun cut him down. His gaze shifted to the window, where a breath of chill air rustled an embroidered curtain. Winter or summer, he always left that window raised a trifle for fresh air. But neither the window nor anything else in the room offered any hope.

"Write," Johnny Silvers said doggedly. "Write, or I'll blow yuh in two!"

Hook Scaffee's voice held a ragged edge. "Wait, kid! That'd be murder. And if I framed you, like you said, killin' me would ruin your last chance of goin' free. You savvy that, don't you?"

"If I've got to go back to the pen, or hang, it'd be a lot easier knowin' you was in hell!" Johnny told him.

"I've got a better way," Scaffee said persuasively. "You're on yore last legs, kid. You're nearly dead from hunger and loss of blood. You'd freeze out in this blizzard, or a law possee would mebbe cut you down and then ask questions. Ain't that right?"

"I . . . yeah, that's right," Johnny admitted, rubbing a hand wearily across his eyes. "What about it?"

"Why, this," Scaffee purred. "I'll help you, and that'll prove I didn't frame you into the pen. I'll fix that leg up for you. I'll hide you here at the Crooked T till you're able to ride. Then I'll give yuh a good hoss and some money, and sneak you out o' the country. You can go away, to Texas or New Mexico, across the border even, and start all over again. That way, everything'd be swell for everybody. How does that sound to you?"

Johnny shook his head doggedly. "I think yo're lyin'. Anyway, there'd still be that robbery and murder charge against me."

"That's right." Scaffee shook his head regretfully. "That can't be helped. But, after a while, mebbe the law'd forget about you. With the money I'd give you, you could start a spread of yore own down there. What about it?"

Plainly, Johnny Silvers was weakening. The gun muzzle lowered a little, and Scaffee could see that Johnny's hands were trembling.

"And what if I tell you to go to hell?" Johnny asked, with a flicker of defiance.

Hook Scaffee's steel-trap mouth clamped. "Then you'd just be out o' luck, kid. You ain't got me fooled. Mebbe you could kill me, all right. But you'd die, too. My boys'd get you, or you'd die out there in the blizzard. The only chance you got to win is to do as I say."

"Damn you, Scaffee!" Johnny said harshly, bitterly. "I swore I'd send your black soul to hell if you didn't sign a confession, clearin' me. I . . . you aim to do it?"

Hook Scaffee knew he'd won. He

could see the bitter defeat in Johnny's eyes. "I don't aim to sign anything," he snapped. "I'm offerin' to help you, and that's a hell of a sight more than you deserve. You got just ten seconds to take me up!"

The gun muzzle dropped, and Johnny's shoulders slumped dejectedly. "I . . . you got me licked, Scaffee. Reckon I bit off more than I could chew. I know you framed me, and I still think you're a lousy skunk. But I'm takin' you up on your proposition. You fix up my leg, hide me till I can ride, then give me a hoss and enough money to get out o' the country. Is that right?"

"That's right," Scaffee said softly.

Johnny gave him a twisted grin. "Mebbe you ain't such a bad gent, after all."

He dropped the six-gun onto the desk top, and slumped wearily into a chair.

"And mebbe I ain't a plumb damn fool, either!" Hook Scaffee said, his voice suddenly harsh and flat with menace. Like a striking snake, his hand had stabbed for the gun Johnny had placed on the desk. Now he was grinning, like a big cat, the gun steady in his hand.

JOHNNY SILVERS' pain-lanced body snapped up rigidly again. "W-what do yuh mean?" he asked dazedly.

"I mean you're just a poor, dumb sap, kid," Scaffee said mockingly. "Did you think I was crazy enough to do them things I mentioned?"

"But you said—"

"Never mind what I said," Scaffee rasped. "That was when you had a gun in your hand. Now *I've* got the gun."

Johnny seemed to be bewildered, stunned, by the sudden turn of events. Desperation was on his lean freckled features.

"What you aimin' to do, Scaffee?" he asked slowly.

"What do you reckon?" the big rancher taunted. "You know too blasted much. You've got just about thirty seconds to live, kid. I'll put a bullet through you, then go get the law. You're an escaped convict; I'll just be doin' the law a favor by killin' you. I'll say you broke in here and tried to kill me, which is the truth. It'll sound pretty, the way I tell it. Savvy?"

"I savvy you're a filthy, slimy snake," Johnny said bitterly. "It ain't right. You're the one that robbed that stage and killed the driver. You're the one that ought to die."

"Sure, I robbed that stage and framed it onto you," Hook Scaffee grinned. "It was a slick scheme, and it worked. You went to the pen, and I've got your outfit. I shot that stage guard, personal. Pete Tolbert stole your hoss and tally book. Wearin' a mask, and bein' about your size, he looked a lot like you. You knowin' them things don't matter now, 'cause you're cashin' in yore chips right now!"

Johnny saw Scaffee's lips pull back from fanglike teeth in a savage grin, saw Scaffee's finger tighten slowly on the trigger.

But now the bewilderment and despair had left Johnny's pain-lined face. A tired, satisfied smile curled his lips as he looked at the big Crooked T rancher.

"You won't do any killin', Scaffee," he said softly. "Not with that gun. It's empty."

"You won't get anywhere with that trick," Scaffee sneered.

"It's empty," Johnny repeated. "That's why I left it there on the desk, so you could grab it. You thought you tricked me, but you tricked yourself. I held you up with

an empty gun—the gun you've got in your hand."

"Empty, hell!" Hook Scaffee snarled, and jerked the trigger.

There was an empty click. Scaffee spat a curse, jerked the trigger again, and again. Then, stunned amazement in his eyes, he looked at the gun in his hand.

"I KNEW you were behind that stage robbery and killin'," Johnny Silvers was saying. "But I didn't have any proof. I knew I had to make you convict yourself. I reached Wolf Point a few hours ago, talked to Sheriff Ford and told him what I wanted to do. He agreed not to lock me up until I'd had a chance at you. He wouldn't furnish me a horse, though, an' he knew, with a blizzard blowin' up, I couldn't get far afoot. I had to walk the ten miles from town. But it was worth it. Scaffee, when you admitted killin' that stage guard a moment ago, you put a rope about your own neck."

Hook Scaffee stood with massive shoulders hunched forward, cold fury glowing in his eyes. "You're still a sap, kid," he growled. "Nobody but me and you heard what I said—and you won't ever leave this ranch alive!"

"You're wrong, two ways," Johnny Silvers said softly. "Somebody else *did* hear what you said. Sheriff Ford and some deputies followed me out from town. They heard every word we said, at that crack over there in the window!"

Into Hook Scaffee's furious eyes came the stark certainty that Johnny Silvers was telling the truth. He whirled, mouthing curses, and sent his massive body hurtling across the room, toward the gun that Johnny Silvers had tossed into a corner. But Johnny had expected that. His own cannonading body met Scaffee's in midair, and they crashed to the floor.

Agonizing pain shot upward through Johnny's weary body as he smashed into the giant. The room seemed to explode in a red burst of fury as Scaffee's fist blasted into his face. Nausea rolled over him. But he fought back, fiercely, silently, trying to keep Scaffee from reaching that gun in the corner.

Then, above the sounds of battle and the hammering blizzard winds, Johnny heard something that sent fresh hope surging through him—the clatter of breaking glass. From the tail of his eye he saw a wiry, gray-bearded man as he lunged headfirst through the window, gun in hand. And behind Sheriff Ford, struggling to get into the room, were half a dozen other men.

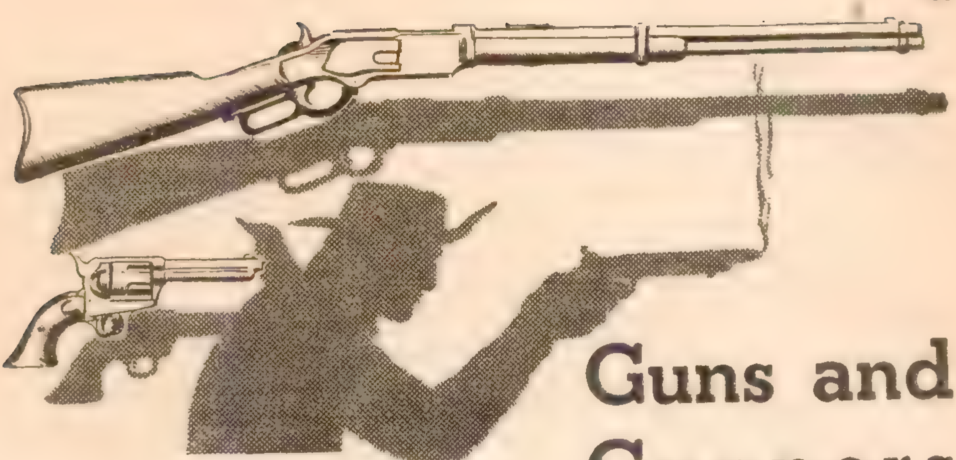
The runty old lawman came leaping across the room. The clubbed gun in his hand rose and fell, and Johnny Silvers felt the body of Hook Scaffee go limp.

Johnny tried to get to his feet. But somehow he couldn't make it. He seemed to be floating downward toward a pit of velvety darkness.

"Danged if he ain't passed out," he heard a voice say. "Well, he's been through plenty hell. But now he ain't got a thing to worry about. It won't take this range long to show what a swell fellow they think he is!"

That was the last thing Johnny Silvers remembered as the pain-easing darkness closed over him, and he smiled softly. There'd been real friendliness in that voice. It seemed to symbolize the future. A friendly, peaceful range and a little cow outfit! What more could a gent ask?

THE END.



Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

PERHAPS the most used firearm in the United States today is the shotgun. Shotguns are used for a wide variety of purposes and on all kinds of American game, particularly at short range. The shotgun was designed chiefly for bird shooting, but a great many states make it illegal to hunt deer with any other form of weapon, barring rifles in the woods.

If you wish to use the shotgun for deer you should by all means avoid the use of buckshot. This is totally unreliable, and has extremely low killing power. Moreover it is difficult to make successful hits with it. At very short range of fifty feet or under, buckshot is extremely deadly. Beyond that point it spreads tremendously.

In a standard twelve gauge high velocity buckshot load there are nine pellets of No. 00 shot and twelve pellets of No. 0. With either of these loads the energy of each pellet is less at seventy-five yards than the tiny .22 long rifle bullet at a hundred yards. Numerous tests have clearly shown that at a hundred yards several shots, or else pure luck, are required to get even one pellet into a target the size of a deer.

In one officially conducted test before a State Legislature interested in outlawing buckshot, a total of 112 pellets were fired at a deer-size target at a hundred yards, only two of them striking the target. A test conducted at fifty measured feet showed that with the standard load of No. 00 buck a fifteen-and-a-half-inch circle was required to hold the charge, indicating the rapidity with which these spread.

Single-ball loads are far more powerful and adequate to take care of

LITERATURE FOR YOU!

Various literature is available to our readers for postage stamps to cover mailing costs. Here is our latest lists: "STRAIGHT SHOOTING," 16 pages of shooting instructions, 3c; "WESTERN AMMUNITION HANDBOOK," 72 pages, 5c; "WINCHESTER AMMUNITION HANDBOOK," 44 pages, 3c; "FANCY SHOOTING," by "Ad" Topperwein, 16 pages, 3c; "COLT," 3c; "SMITH & WESSON," 3c; "REMINGTON," 6c; "SAVAGE," 3c; "STEVENS," 3c; and a large three-pound bundle of assorted catalogs, 30c east and 38c west of Chicago.

Postage stamps are accepted. If your letter requires a reply, inclose an additional stamp.

deer, but are extremely inaccurate to shoot. Today there is available on the market a rifled slug capable of extremely accurate shooting in twelve, sixteen and twenty-gauge numbers as made by all standard manufacturers. This is by far the best bet for the hunter who desires to use a shotgun on deer. With any standard shotgun in reasonable condition, it is possible consistently to hit a tomato can at fifty yards. Better use that load in place of buckshot.

Speaking of shotguns, many inquiries come in concerning skeet and the proper gun to use.

In skeet shooting, almost any form of double, over and under, pump, or automatic shotgun can be used. This should have open boring for best results. In other words, the same thing you would use for bird hunting in the field, not long-range duck shooting. As you get into skeet shooting with your standard field gun you gradually form definite ideas as to what you think you need and you may purchase a special skeet gun, if you so desire. If you have a regular field gun, there is no necessity for special equipment in order to enjoy this excellent game.

And that just reminds me that I am writing this department on an anniversary, as it were. I have just finished my five hundredth round at skeet.

There are twenty-five rounds of shells in a single round of skeet, and this means that I have consumed at this game 12,500 shells, not including the many "proof" shots, or shots to be taken over due to broken birds or similar problems. This means that if all of my empty shells were lined up end to end they would stretch out for more than 2,750 feet, or well over a half mile. It represents twenty-five cases of shells weighing 1,450 pounds.

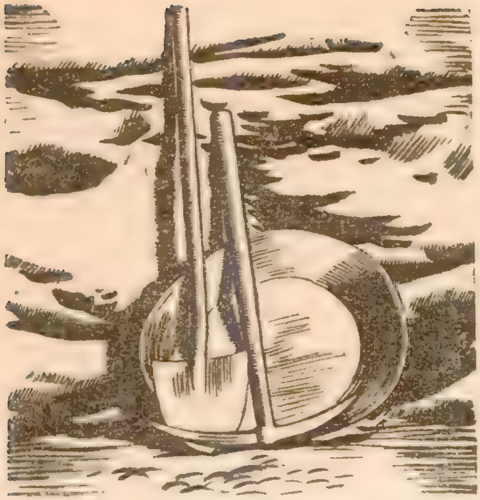
The man who objects to recoil can quickly overcome his objections by learning how to take it so that it does not bother him.

Recoil pads may help some people, but they are quite unnecessary and more or less of a nuisance. Recoil pads are inclined to catch on clothing when snapping a gun to the shoulder for a quick shot. If you must use a recoil pad, you can reduce this tendency to grab the clothing by covering the back with soft leather.

Get a thin piece of smooth leather clipped from a ladies' discarded handbag. Coat the rubber end of your recoil pad with ordinary rubber cement. Use a piece of leather slightly larger than the butt and coat its inside surface with rubber cement. Permit both the recoil pad and the leather to dry and then press your leather surface over the butt plate. Let it set for an hour, then, with a sharp razor blade, trim it carefully. It takes but a short time to apply, and is an extremely useful tip.

If you are interested in making a cartridge collection and would like to hear from other collectors, write to this department, inclosing a three-cent stamp for a list of names which will be sent to you as soon as it is compiled. In this way you may be able to trade some of your duplicates with others for something you really need for your collection.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

THE use of an easily constructed Long Tom is one of the accepted economical methods of washing gold-bearing gravel on a moderately small scale. Individual prospectors and groups of two or three partners still carry on with them in many of the gold placer sections of the West today, where the deposits they have found are fairly shallow and a steady flow of water is available.

A. B., of Greensboro, North Carolina, has asked about Long Toms this week. Many other readers, too, have written in for data on this practical method of placer-gold saving.

In the first place the most efficient Long Tom set-up is simply a variation of sluice-box washing, with this important exception: instead of all the boxes being the same width, the head box of the Long Tom is about three feet wide (and twelve feet long). The gravel is shoveled into this, and washed through a sheet-iron screen containing half-inch perforations. Gold and fine gravel is washed through. The coarse stuff is held back by the screen. The screened material then is carried along in a tapering box from six to twelve feet long, depending on the nature of the gravel and how much washing is required to free the gold, and dropped about a foot into a final foot-wide box, also from six to twelve feet long, depending on conditions. Riffles to catch the gold are set in this last box, or trough. Waste material is washed through the open lower end and out onto the tailing pile.

The best working slope at which each box should be set varies from one to one and a half inches per foot of box. The amount of gravel that can be handled with such a set-up averages around three cubic yards of dirt a day where the gravel is tightly packed and hard to work, and up to six yards a day in good, loose, fairly boulder-free, easily worked ground—that is, with two men working the Tom, one shoveling in, forking out the coarse stones from the head box, et cetera, and the other tending the Tom itself and keeping the tailing pile clear.

Toms today are largely a matter of personal preference, and a good source of evening camp-side argument among placer miners, a lot of whom hold out under any and all occasions that a straight sluice box is better than a Tom. However, men who have had experience with a Long Tom and prefer its wider shoveling-in head box swear just as heavily by that method. There is no doubt that the abrupt foot-high drops between the consecutive boxes are a distinct aid in breaking up lumps of hard-packed or clayey gravel and thus are of material assistance in freeing the gold particles

that may be locked in such material. Long Toms were a favorite washing method in handling the bonanza beach sand at Nome, Alaska, in the early days. Perhaps because the sands were easily handled, washed freely and did not require a very long length of travel to give up their gold.

We are always glad to hear from practical prospectors concerning detailed methods of gold-saving devices and systems, the success of which they have proved in actual operation. So the letter we have just received from L. G. C. is both timely and welcome.

This correspondent says "One of the best methods I ever found for saving fine placer gold that had not traveled very long distances from its original source was by using longitudinal riffles one and one half inches high and four inches wide, set in the bottom of a set-up of two sluice boxes, with zigzag headers at both ends of the boxes to give the water flow a cross thrust. In operation the box was first allowed to fill with gravel coarse enough to drop in between the longitudinal riffles. The small interstices between the stones in this gravel were found to catch more fine gold than any other riffle system I ever tried.

"The gap between the wood riffles was the same as the width of the riffle, and the riffles should be set down solid on the bottom of the sluice boxes. I always preferred a planed-wood bottom. If a rough wood bottom is used the boxes have to be burned later to get all the fine gold out of them. If the gold separates easily from the waste material, most of the values will be found near the head of the first and second boxes. If the gold is in clayey stuff, it naturally cleans slower and consequently longer travel is required and should be provided for by additional boxes. In Thunder Mountain, Idaho, our gold was very fine. Once we kept adding boxes until we had over three hundred feet of sluice, with a drop of one foot in the middle to turn the rocks over, because otherwise the flat rocks were apt to carry a lot of the gold away in the sticky bunches of clay adhering to them. With this long sluice we managed to save virtually all the values, in spite of the fact that the clay had to travel such a distance before it freed the gold. I could dip the gold up by the spoonful at the head riffles. Of course, our ground was rich, practically bonanza stuff, but even so the gold was fine and hard to save.

"Our boxes were built out of fifteen-inch hand-sawed lumber, cut one and one quarter inches thick from white spruce. They were made in standard twelve-foot lengths. A slope of six inches to the box was used in the first two boxes. After that the grade was stepped up gradually to nine inches in the last box."

To L. B., San Francisco, California: In working a Long Tom, when the riffles fill up, the material caught by them is removed and cleaned up in a gold pan.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

We've had lots of letters from satisfied members of the Tree lately who had their letters published here and as a result got "so many Pen Pals they didn't know what to do." Leah Edwards is the most recent one to get bogged down—not because she hasn't the time to write to all of you, but because her budget can't stand it! You know, three cents doesn't sound like much when it stands alone, but multiplied by one or two hundred, it amounts to quite a tidy sum. So don't be displeased with Leah if she hasn't answered your letter. She would have been only too happy to, if it were at all possible, and she wants to thank each and every one of you for writing to her.

Charles will tell you about his travels—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-six years old and have been in the navy seven years. I have served on nearly every type of ship the navy has, and am now on one of Uncle Sam's submarines. I have traveled quite a bit, and in my travels have visited South America, Panama, the Virgin Islands and every port on the East and West coasts. I would like to hear from boys and girls about my age and will answer all letters promptly. My favorite sport is swimming, and I also enjoy dancing. Charles Casey, U. S. S. *Pompano 181*, Mare Island, California

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Here's a lesson in contentment—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have more hobbies than a dog has fleas and would like to hear from lots of Pen Pals about their special interests. I make lovely quilts, do embroidery work, collect and read all kinds of books, collect snapshots of old people, make scrapbooks of all sorts of subjects, collect strings of beads, cream pitchers and salt and pepper shakers, of which I hope some day to have a thousand sets. I am forty-five years old, and my husband and I live twenty-nine miles from a town of any size. Since he is an invalid, we seldom go anywhere. However, because I have so many nice hobbies, I am not dissatisfied. By the way, I am anxious to get copies of these old books, "Dora Thorne," "Thorns And Orange Blossoms," "Oh, Money, Money!" and any of the Pollyanna books. If anyone has these and does not want them, I would appreciate it if they would send them to me. I want to hear from everyone, regardless of age, and want them to tell me all about their hobbies. I have a good big mailbox and the postman comes every day, so let me hear from you all soon.—Mrs. Beulah Morrison, Route No. 3, Poolville, Texas

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Helen is back for a second visit—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Five years ago you printed a letter from me in the Hollow Tree. Since that time my father has died and my two sisters and I live together. My sisters work and I am alone most of the time. I have traveled in twelve of our States and have just returned from a three months' stay in the Colorado Rockies. I promise to answer every letter.—Helen Hrabik, P. O. Box 542, Council Bluffs, Iowa

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Write to this Aussie—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young Aussie, sixteen years old, and I would like a few Pen Pals from Dakota, Arizona and Nebraska. I will write on any topic and will tell anybody anything they want to know about Australia. I will answer all letters, so, pals, sling a little ink my way, please.—W. McGowan, Jr., Tarwin Street, Morwell, Victoria, Australia

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Jean is a budding young composer—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a Montrealer twenty-five years old and would like to hear from Pen Pals all over the world who are interested in music, lyricists and composers. I write songs myself and like to set words to music. Here's hoping I meet many friends through the Hollow Tree.—Jean Paul, 824 College Street, Montreal, Canada

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From out Oregon way comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am forty-two years old and have been a reader of Western Story for years. I am a miner and get lonesome at times, so I would

like to join the Old Holla and see if I can get a few Pen Pals. I enjoy outdoor life and like to read and write. I will tell all who are interested about our Oregon country, its mines, farms, small ranches, et cetera. I will exchange snapshots and information, so come on, young and old, and fill my mailbox. I will try and write you interesting letters.—Joe Henricksen, River Route, Merlin, Oregon

Grace likes music—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am seventeen years old and want to hear from everyone everywhere. I love to dance, roller skate, ice skate, and play any kind of outdoor game, even football. I collect aviation pictures as a hobby and have several scrapbooks full of them. I love music and play the guitar, ukulele and piano. I enjoy everything anyone else does, so write to me and fill my mailbox right up to the top.—Grace Hamilton, Boston Road, North Billerica, Massachusetts

Calling Gene Autry fans—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been a reader of Western Story for a long time and would like my plea for Pen Pals printed. I am a sixteen-year-old country girl and my hobbies are collecting movie stars' photos, and stamps. My favorite sports are horseback riding and swimming. I would especially like to hear from Pen Pals who are Gene Autry fans, so sling some ink my way.—Georgetta Thorpe, Route No. 1, Ellsworth, Michigan

Denis wants pals all over the world—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a great admirer of the Hollow Tree and have always longed to hear from Pen Pals from all over the world. I am in high hopes that I'll be allowed to join your club and make some new acquaintances in this big wide world. My favorite sports are football, ice skating and cricket. I am fifteen years old. I will exchange snapshots and promise to answer all lettters.—Denis Smith, 119a Fawcus Street, Belgravia, Johannesburg, South Africa

Frank likes swing—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young man twenty-one years old and I would like to hear from girls and boys all over the world. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snapshots with all who answer. My hobby is photography, and I like all sports, especially swimming, tennis and football. I also enjoy dancing and swing music. Come on, all you boys and girls, and drop me a line.—Frank W. Gibson, Box No. 2, Warrenville, South Carolina

Charlotte's letter is short and sweet—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a small-town girl looking for lots of Pen Pals. I like dancing and all sports. Fill my mailbox soon. I will answer all letters.—Charlotte Hutchinson, Box 94, McKenna, Washington

Move over, pals, and make room for Howard—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Have you room for a poet who slings a coal shovel eight hours a day? I'm twenty years old, finished high school last year, but I have to work a while before I can go any further with my schooling. Last year I was a member of the champion debate team of the Tri-States, and we attended the National Debate Tournament in Beverly Hills. We visited the Grand Canyon, Great Salt Lake and the San Francisco Fair. I have had a few of my poems published and hope to make a full-time job of writing sometime. I'm interested in everything and everybody, regardless of age, and the only letters I won't answer are the ones you don't write.—Howard Essary, Route No. 2, Dyersburg, Tennessee

Harold has a surprise for you—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am anxious to become a Pen Pal to everyone up to the age of twenty-five. My hobby is writing letters and collecting stamps of the Americas. I am willing to carry on a correspondence about any subject that is really interesting or can be made interesting. I will try hard to answer all letters promptly and will exchange snapshots. Who will be the first twelve to answer this plea? I have a surprise for them.—Harold Den Molson, 2020 East Seventh Street, Tucson, Arizona

Oney just asks for a chance—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I want lots of Pals, young or old, from everywhere. I am a lonesome farm girl eighteen years old and love the great outdoors and adventure. I can write good letters, and if you'll all give me a tryout, I'm sure you won't find me lacking.—Oney Wright, R. F. D. No. 1, Box 63, Axton, Virginia

Jack sounds like a rootin'-tootin' hombre—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am looking for some real pards and wish you would help me. I've been reading Western Story for several years, and though I have answered many letters published in the Tree, I have never received an answer. I am nineteen years old and live in the ranching country along the Mexican border. I like riding, roping and all sports, especially football, which I played through high school and my first year of college. I am an expert with a pistol and can draw fire within one second. I know all about the Southwest and will make my letters interesting. I will exchange snapshots, so send me yours. I am a singer and would like to hear from those who like music.—Jack Boies, 300 Washington Street, Del Rio, Texas

Dorothy is a poet—

Dear Miss Rivers:

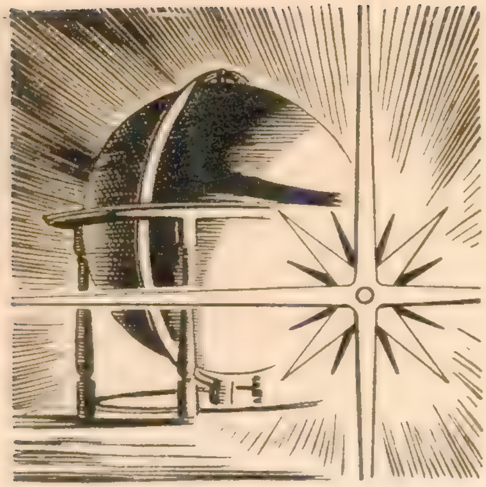
Howdy, Miss Rivers, how are you?
I'm a reader of your magazine, too.
May I join your Hollow Tree
And have some folks write to me?

I am five feet two, with eyes of blue,
Single, white, and Irish, too.
Girls and boys of twenty-eight,
Send me a line. Is it a date?—Dorothy Augustine, 4524 Ninth Avenue, Los Angeles, California

Write to these two lads in far-off India—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are two men in the Royal Artillery and would like a few Pen Pals who might be interested in hearing tales about this mysterious country. Our favorite sports are horseback riding, swimming and shooting. We also have quite a collection of snaps which we will exchange with all who write us.—Signaller J. Parkinson and Gunner J. Latham, X Battery, Royal Artillery, Cawnpore, India



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

ALASKA continues to attract the interest of readers of this column. This is understandable when it is remembered that it is the last frontier and is the only place where the government will give a settler a farm of a hundred and sixty acres reasonably near a railroad under the conditions of the Homestead Law.

I have frequently written about crop raising in Alaska, so this article will be in answer to those who want to know something of working conditions in the towns up there.

The labor situation in Alaska has changed in recent years. There was a time when any man could go up there with assurance of a job in mining, fishing, or other industry at high wages. This condition naturally attracted a great deal of labor, and now there are more people than there are jobs for. Also, it must be remembered that work is not constant the year round in all parts of Alaska, since much of it is seasonal. Fishing, for instance, goes on only from four to eight months, and mining depends on the weather.

A wise rule for anybody who is going up there to investigate the work situation is to have a round-trip ticket and enough cash to live on for a while.

Mining, of course, has been the most dramatic of Alaska's many resources, but you don't see so many men these days with pick and pan. Where the individual prospector roamed with his pack and camped on a stream bed, you now see great dredges digging a ton at a mouthful. Where the individual miner holed up for the winter, the present big-time mine operator uses a process of thawing frozen gravel by the use of cold water and getting out the gold. Of course, a good prospector with initiative still has his chance there.

Contrary to general belief, gold is not the only mining activity. The production of copper runs into millions of dollars, as does silver, coal, platinum, tin and lead, and many other minerals are mined to a lesser extent. In short, there will be a constant expansion of the mining business in all its various phases, and a mining man can go there with the assurance that the ore won't run out.

Another business holding a good future is that of timber. A man who can handle it has a wealth of material from which to draw, the known

For homestead information and a list of free publications about the opportunities in Alaska, write John North, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

stands of commercial wood running into the billions of board feet, plus countless miles of unestimated forests.

The man who wants to get a commercial start in timber, and who knows his business, will find waiting for him numberless waterfalls which the government has inspected and pronounced fit to furnish power.

As to fur trapping, the territory is the home of beaver, muskrat, marmot, fox, lynx, marten, mink, weasel, ermine, several species of bear and other animals. Trappers who live there make a living from them, but a stranger would have to pay a fifty-dollar fee for the privilege of trapping.

On the other hand, with the decrease of possibilities from trapping wild fur bearers, there is a growing opportunity for the man who can raise his own animals. Fur farms, principally raising mink and fox, are springing up and doing well. The cold climate is conducive to health in the animals and to a better fur than that raised in warmer climates. Added to this advantage is that of a good source of food. Fish represent a large part of the diet of these animals, and the local supply is cheap and unlimited. Near canneries, the fur farmer can get all the fish scraps he needs from the cannery simply for the trouble of hauling it away.

There is great opportunity for the processer of foodstuffs in Alaska, and for the distributor. Some of the services which are lacking and which could be established successfully by the newcomer are packing houses, canning factories, sugar-beet refineries, et cetera.

There are no systems for bringing produce from the farmer to the consumer, and this is badly needed. The Alaska farmer could get a high price for his goods if he could get it to market. There is room for rural truck lines, and there are over two thousand miles of roads for them to operate on.

Another opportunity for men with specialized training is the culture of oysters. The government will lease tidelands to experienced men who will plant and raise seed oysters.

There is a growing demand for chickens and eggs, and a poultryman who knows his business can make good money there if he is efficient enough to overcome the handicap of weather and transportation charges on feed. A million and a half dozen eggs have to be imported annually. They *could* be raised locally by experienced men.

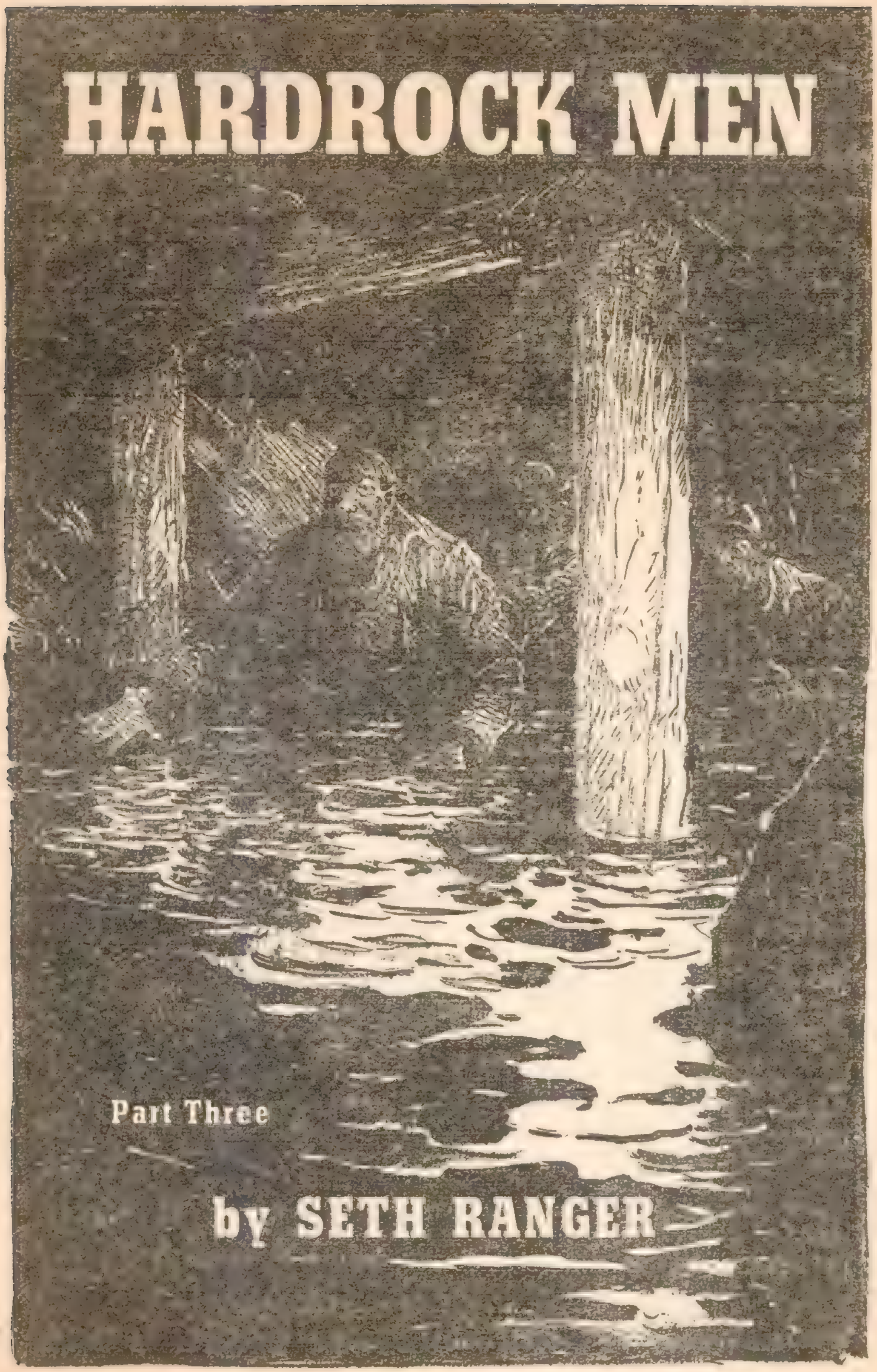
Experienced dirt farmers are needed to raise vegetables for local consumption. It takes a lot of work, but there is a good future in it for a man who wants to carve a home out of the wilderness. And you can get the land free.

Most of the above jobs require some capital and plenty of experience. So, while there is plenty of common labor there, the man who knows a business and can finance it will find there is still a great opportunity to get in on the ground floor in Alaska.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

HARDROCK MEN



Part Three

by SETH RANGER

The Story So Far:

As superintendent of the Old Glory, a gold mine extending under the Deception Straits in Alaska, Jess Reagan had built up an impressive reputation in the field of low-grade mining. Realizing that he is getting too old for his job, he has trained Tim Bradford to take his place, although he knows that Kirk Turner, president of the company, has his heart set on his son Ray becoming next superintendent of the mine.

Sam Pelton, a miner who had been fired for drunkenness, conceals himself within the mine, and when Reagan is making a tour of inspection, hurls down several pieces of rock on his head. Reagan loses his footing and plunges to a lower level.

After Jess Reagan's death, Tim Bradford is appointed acting superintendent, and Ray Turner is made his assistant. For several months Ray works under Tim, absorbing all the latter can teach him about the mine. Then Kirk Turner fires Tim and promotes Ray to his job.

Tim's dismissal is protested by some of the miners and an election is called, which results in the confirmation of Ray's appointment. Tim leaves Alaska for a vacation, but is recalled by an urgent message from several of the miners who inform him that Ray, in order to increase production, has "robbed" the pillars of rock which support the roof of the mine. They take Tim down into the mine, without Ray's knowledge, and he discovers that salt water is seeping in from Deception Straits.

CHAPTER X

A FATAL BLAST

TIM BRADFORD and Daylight Lee stood near the Submarine Vein and pondered on the situation. In Tim's opinion there was no doubt that robbing the pillars that supported the roof had caused the country rock to shift slightly. Under the pressure of hundreds of feet of salt water, the roof was leaking. Water had found its way through a fault and was pouring steadily into the mine.

"Salt," Tim repeated, after tasting the water again. "There's no doubt of it, Daylight. The pumps won't have any trouble handling it now, but the volume is sure to increase."

Daylight nodded. "Yes. If the pillars are crumbling as you say, Tim," he went on, "that means the roof of the mine will shift under the pressure. The flow of water might keep increasin' steadily, or if somethin' slipped, say, it might come in with a roar."

"If that happened," Tim predicted, "every man below would likely be trapped. The men couldn't possibly leave the cross-cuts and inclines and reach the cages in time."

"What had we better do?" asked Daylight. "It's no use your goin' to Ray Turner. He'd throw you out. He don't want to be told anything."

"I'm not thinking of Turner," Tim answered. "Nor of anyone else in particular. I'm thinking of Jess Reagan's mine. There's only one sensible thing to do. Build a concrete bulkhead across the entrance and shut off the Submarine Vein."

"Plug her up," Daylight said. "I see. It'll take one hell of a plug, old son."

"And plenty of reinforcing steel," Tim added. "Well, let's go on in."

As they advanced into the crosscut, Tim noticed that thousands of tons of ore had been blasted loose and holes drilled for additional blasting. On every hand there was evidence that Ray Turner was robbing the pillars in more ways than one. He was making little effort to clean up the mine as he went along. Instead of leaning toward the safety factor as Jess Reagan and Tim Bradford had always done, he was gambling.

"Blasting will have to stop," Tim declared. "A good heavy blast might pull the plug. Now, here's what you had better do, Daylight. Bring Turner down here and explain what must be done. Tell him it's what

Jess Reagan would have done. Don't mention my name."

"O. K.," Daylight agreed. "But what if he don't follow advice? Call a strike?"

"You'll have to," said Tim. "The men's lives will be in danger. They'll have to bring things to a showdown."

"Tim, will you stick around under cover?" Daylight asked. "We'll need your advice, and we'll see that you're paid for it. If each man chips in ten cents a day, it'll be damned cheap life insurance and—"

"No dice," Tim interrupted. "I'll be on hand. But you boys aren't going to pay me. I'm still working for Jess Reagan."

"I'll bring down blankets and grub," Daylight promised. "You can make yourself snug in one of the old cross-cuts. If you go above ground too much, somebody's liable to spot you."

Daylight made two trips above to get the needed items. This accomplished, he returned home; but he slept fitfully. He was too excited. Now that Tim Bradford was back again, he felt that he could relax and stop some of his worrying. But it was too soon to relax. He rolled out an hour before breakfast, prowled around the house until breakfast time, then gulped it down and went to the superintendent's office.

"What time do you expect the boss in, Mary?" he asked Turner's secretary.

"He'll be along any time now," the girl answered. "He wants to jam more tonnage through the mill and make a better showing than last month. And he'll do it, all right, but I dread to think what things will be like six months from now."

Mary Malloy was no fool. She transcribed all Ray Turner's letters and she knew what was going on—knew, for instance, how Turner had eased up on buying devices that made for safety. The overhead was going down, the production going up, and this would be reflected in the dividends. All of which would make Ray Turner the fair-haired boy in the mining game.

WHEN Turner arrived the girl went into his office to tell him that Daylight Lee was waiting to see him.

"Tell him I'm busy," Turner directed impatiently. "I can't waste time with the old fool."

The girl sighed patiently and looked resigned. "What's the matter with you, now?" Turner demanded.

"Goodness knows," Mary told him bluntly, "anyone with my experience in a mine office shouldn't have a bit of trouble getting a job in Alaska, so if things go wrong I shouldn't worry. But it happens I like this mine and the people here, and I want to see things moving. I think you should listen to some of the people who feel about the mine as I do. We have no ax to grind."

"Oh, send him in," Turner said grumpily. He always resented the loyalty everyone entertained toward Jess Reagan's mine. He wanted the employees to look to him, and not to a memory that was becoming a legend.

Daylight entered and stood before Turner's desk. "I know you don't like me, Mr. Turner," he began abruptly. "And—"

"And you don't like me," Turner cut in.

"I don't dislike anybody," Daylight answered, "with one exception. And you ain't it. I'm not a fool female that screams at the slightest danger, so will you kind o' keep that

in mind when I ask you to go underground with me?"

"If you're going to complain again because we are trimming the pillars, you'd better just forget it." Turner's voice was exasperated.

"I ain't goin' to mention pillars," Daylight answered him. "I just want to show you somethin' that'll make your eyes open plenty wide."

Aroused by something in the old man's voice, Ray Turner accompanied Daylight without further grumbling. They headed for the Submarine Vein. When they stopped at last, Daylight said: "Taste that water comin' down the side of that wall."

Turner obeyed, and a surprised expression passed over his face. "Salt!" For a moment he was thoughtful. "Pumps will take care of it."

"Not if somethin' pulls the plug and drops the channel into the mine," Daylight said. "Mr. Turner, the boys are worried. Hadn't you better call in experts—"

"I'm an expert," snapped Turner.

"Sure," Daylight agreed, "but sometimes a good doctor calls in another. That's what was done when I was blinded. The second doctor agreed with what the first had said," Daylight explained. "But he might have been a little more advanced. He might've saw ways of fixin' it so I could see. If you call in an expert, it'll relieve the boys' minds."

"I don't think that's necessary," Turner said flatly. "I'll watch things closely. "That'll be all, Lee."

Daylight refused to be dismissed so easily. "I know you want to get out the ore you've blasted from the pillars," he said. "That's all right. But build a concrete bulkhead across the narrowest place in the cross-cut. A thick one. Put in an iron door. One that's stronger than boiler plate. Then if somethin' goes wrong, the mine won't be flooded."

"I'll think about it," Turner promised. He was thinking that a bulkhead, strongly reinforced, plus an iron door and fittings, would cost enough to knock his month's overhead expenses into a cocked hat.

Daylight sensed what he was thinking, and saw that further argument would be useless. He returned to the surface and went home to sleep until it was time for his shift.

TIM BRADFORD remained below two days, checking on the mine. He returned to the surface at night and went to Daylight Lee's home. He slept in the daytime and went out late at night for a little exercise. Not even the rumor of his presence touched the big mining camp.

"I think you'd better go down again." Daylight advised him several days after his talk with Ray Turner. "That prize damn fool ain't doin' a thing about a bulkhead. Tomorrow he starts drillin' on the last pillar."

That night Tim went below again. It took him only a few moments to discover that the water was coming in faster and it was heavier with salt. There was less fresh water content in the tiny stream running into the sump. Tim didn't go up again. He had an idea he might be needed.

A committee of miners, fearing a disaster, called on Ray Turner and requested protective action. All they received were evasive promises and statistics to prove there was no danger.

One morning Daylight Lee made his way to Tim's bunk in the cross-cut and awakened him with a rough shake of the shoulder.

"They're going to blast ore off that last pillar," he said excitedly. "Powder's in and the wires are connected. The water's coming into the mine faster, too."

Tim turned on his flashlight and pulled on his boots. It wasn't far from his hide-out to the nearest group of miners. He made his way to them.

"Where'd you come from, Tim?" a straw boss demanded, pumping his hand.

"No time for talk now, boys," Tim said quickly. "Light out for the surface, and don't say a word to anyone about my being here."

'We get it," the straw boss said. "O. K., boys, knock off."

The gang started for the cage and Tim hurried on. Within a half hour's time he had sent all of the men in the lower levels to safety. He telephoned the cage operator and warned him not to bring anyone down.

Putting the phone down, Tim saw a bobbing miner's lamp ahead of him and yelled. The man stopped dead in his tracks and turned. It was Sam Pelton.

"What the hell are you doin' down here, Bradford?" he demanded.

"Getting the men out before that blast is fired," Tim said brusquely. "You'd better hightail it for the surface. No telling what'll happen if Turner sets off another blast."

"Nothin's goin' to happen," Pelton said confidently.

"You're a fool, Pelton," Tim told him, "but you ought to be able to understand this: The average boiler pressure runs from one hundred pounds to the square inch to around two hundred. That's high for some. Well, the water pressure on the bottom of Deception Straits, where it's eight hundred feet deep, is three hundred and sixty pounds to the square inch. You know what happens when a boiler bursts. Think what'll happen if the mine roof lets go."

Then he was gone. He hurried to the nearest ladder and began climbing down to the lowest level. He was half way down when he heard a sinister swish. He swung around the ladder just in time to avoid the rock that came whistling past his shoulder. As it shattered, a second one came down. After that there was silence. Tim went cold with fury.

"You damn skunk!" he called up. "I'll settle with you later for that dirty trick."

Tim struck the bottom and found several fragments of the rock that had almost hit him. He picked up one and shoved it into his pocket, for later examination. That would tell whether the rocks had dropped from the roof or, as he believed, they were picked up from one of the lower levels and dropped with murderous intent.

Tim encountered Daylight Lee and several men in the Submarine Vein cross-cut.

"Where's Turner?" he asked abruptly.

The men were amazed by his appearance, but they sensed the urgency in his voice and merely pointed to where Turner stood with another group.

But Turner, too, had heard Tim's voice, and he came up hurriedly.

"You've no business down here, Bradford," he said angrily.

"I'm a stockholder," Tim declared, "and I'm interested in this mine continuing as a paying proposition. You're liable to flood the whole business if you set off that blast. I've sent all the men up except this bunch right here. Now I'm asking you to put off firing the blast until you can build a bulkhead."

SO you put the bulkhead idea into Lee's head, eh?" Turner accused. "I might've known it. Well, Lee, that finishes you around here. You're fired. And if you men want to strike, go ahead and be damned to you. I'm through with this interference." He was uncontrollably angry, and his words sounded as if his throat was closed tight with rage.

"Forget the mine for a minute," Tim tried to reason with him, "and think of yourself. If this mine's flooded, you're through as a miner. And your father will be out a couple of million dollars."

But Ray Turner, blind with rage, could think of but one thing—he had to prove his authority and discredit Tim Bradford for all time. He held a small switch in his hand. A squeeze would complete the circuit and set off the blast. With a defiant stare at Tim, he squeezed and the rock shook under them.

There was a moment's silence. Tim could hear Daylight breathing, but he imagined Ray Turner was holding his breath. Tim knew he was holding his own breath, his ears tuned to catch the slightest sound of water.

A faint odor of powder gas came to his nostrils, then he heard Ray Turner say: "I told you I knew what I was doing. Now get out of the mine and stay out. I'll have you arrested if you step foot on Old Glory property again. Understand?"

"Sure," Tim answered. "But Turner luck, and not sound judgment, saved your skin. I was taught in a different school—"

"Shut up, Tim!" Daylight commanded. "I hear water falling—enough to fill a four-inch pipe." The rock began to shake under their feet. It was like a small earthquake and it was accompanied by a deep roar.

"Clear out!" the blind man shouted. "The plug's been pulled!"

For a moment Ray Turner refused to believe the old miner. Then a blast of air, heavy with the odor of burned powder, struck his face. The air was suddenly thick, the lights dim. It was hard to breathe. A solid wall of water gushed at them, sending them sprawling. Lights smothered in the water went out and were knocked from hands and off helmets. It was pitch dark, but above the roar of the waters Tim heard Daylight Lee bellow: "If your lights go out, follow me!"

"They've gone out!" Raw Meat Riley answered. "Keep yellin', Daylight. I can't find the ladder."

The blind man who had moved about the mine for so many years in utter blackness tapped along the walls and got his bearings. Water, knee deep, moved about them at the speed of three miles an hour, and it was coming faster every second. A boiler explodes and the steam and water scatter, and that's the end of it. But the pressure above the hole in the mine roof was constant as the

sea pushed into the break from all sides.

Daylight went up an iron ladder faster than he had ever climbed before, then he stopped and waited. The others came up, almost crawling over each other.

"All here?" Daylight shouted. "Tim! Raw Meat Riley! Ray Turner! The others!"

A chorus of voices answered. Then Daylight was gone again, the others stumbling along behind him, each keeping his hand on the shoulder of the man ahead. The wind created by water forcing air from the lower levels was almost a gale, but for a moment there was no water. It was being spilled into cross-cuts, down inclines and into drifts. As soon as these were filled the ore tram level would get the full force of it.

A mine mule came from somewhere, running blindly, striking rock, falling down, then getting up again. Elsewhere the men could hear the screams of the doomed animals left hitched when Tim ordered the men out of the mine.

Tim heard a man's wild cry immediately behind him. He didn't know he had overtaken anyone in the blind rush, for it was his plan to remain in the rear and help anyone who had fallen. He knew the mine almost as well as Daylight.

"I'll see what's wrong," he called. He turned and ran back, digging his toes into the rock, bending his body against the blast of air. "Where are you?" he bellowed at the top of his lungs.

He heard a faint answer ahead. "I'm lost! Strike a light!"

CHAPTER XI

BURIED!

DAYLIGHT LEE'S keen ears were so filled with the shouts of the men behind him and the roar of air and water that he did not

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hear Tim saying he was going back. He stopped once and Ray Turner almost climbed over his back.

"Keep close to the left wall," Daylight advised. "If you get too far to the right you're liable to tumble down an incline a couple of hundred feet."

That incline, which Tim had named the Reagan Vein because Jess Reagan had discovered it and was confident it would develop the richest ore in the mine, would soon be flooded. There were no men down there. Tim had ordered them above.

The party groped through the darkness, inching past the incline, while water spilled around their ankles and tumbled into the depths. Daylight's pace quickened once more. He could feel Ray Turner's fingers stabbing into the flesh on his shoulders, clutching him in blind terror.

The incline was filled before they had gone a hundred yards, and now the air was knocking them along. Hands, shoulders and heads were cut and bruised against the rough walls, but hardly a man noticed the contact. Each was too eager to clutch at the shoulder of the man ahead.

"We're almost out," Daylight yelled. "You should see the cage light any minute now."

"I see it!". Ray Turner's voice was almost hysterical. On the wings of panic he pushed past Daylight and was the first man to reach the cage. "Hurry! Hurry!" he bellowed.

The men stumbled into the cage and fell exhausted on the floor. The last two men were literally blown in. The single outlet for escaping air was the cage shaft. "Let 'er go!" Turner ordered.

The cage started to move, but Daylight yelled: "Tim! Tim!" There was no answer. "We've got to wait for Tim!" he bellowed above the rush of air. "Lower the cage!"

The operator tried to lower the cage, but it shook up and down like a leaf. "It can't be lowered!" Raw Meat Riley shouted. "The air's liftin' us up."

As the words left his mouth the cage began to shoot upward. The drums, responding to the operator's efforts, turned at top speed, but there was slack in the cable. And presently it began whipping, knotting and coiling on top of the cage. They could see it as it piled up, and they watched it with fear. The instant the air no longer supported the cage it would drop. The cable would snap and unless the air cushioned it, it would crash to the bottom.

Daylight couldn't see what was going on, but he could hear. Raw Meat Riley clutched his arm. "Listen, Daylight," he said, "this is one time your experience won't do you any good. You've got to see what you're doing'. She's goin' to hit the top in a minute. Maybe she'll hold, maybe she won't. We've got to jump. I'll give you a push, then follow."

"You save yourself," Daylight urged.

"After you brought all of us out?" Raw Meat growled. "Not on your life!" He broke off, crouched behind Daylight and waited. They were nearing the top. They stopped abruptly, the cage top partially crushing under the heap of cable. Raw Meat knocked Daylight through the air. The blind man struck on his hands and knees on the landing and Riley's body spilled over him a moment later.

It was several minutes before all the men got out of the cage. They were all exhausted, numbed by shock. Daylight was the first to speak. "The mine's gone to hell,

Turner," he said heavily. "And Tim Bradford's down there."

"Went back after somebody," grunted Raw Meat Riley, "and got caught."

"Who could it've been?" Daylight asked. "Who was down there except this party?"

"I saw Sam Pelton down there earlier," Riley told him. "I hope Tim didn't lose his life tryin' to save that rat."

Ray Turner sat on the platform with his back against a post and tried to gather his wits. He didn't care about Tim Bradford, Sam Pelton or anyone else. He was thinking that the mine was gone. In a few hours, when the last ore went through, the mill would be silent. The last faint trickle of gold would wash off the tables and Old Glory Mine would be history.

WITHOUT a word, Turner left the mine mouth and slipped swiftly into the shadows. There were three short-wave radio transmitting stations in the camp. One was on a large cannery tender tied up at the wharf; two belonged to a couple of men named Kelso and Brainard. He went directly to Kelso's cabin. The man had a job in the mill and was on duty now.

Turner worked over the set for several minutes and finally picked up a station in Seattle. He asked the other operator to bring Kirk Turner to the transmitter.

"Is it important?" the operator asked.

"A matter of life and death," Turner assured him. A good hour passed before he heard his father's voice. Kirk Turner was well aware that others might be listening in, and he merely said: "Father speaking. Are you hurt?"

"No. I'm O. K.," Ray Turner said. "Don't ask any questions. You'd better unload."

"Unload?"

"Yes. Lock, stock and barrel!" Ray said. "In a few days you'll know why."

"All right," his father said. "But give me as much time as possible."

"That's what I plan to do," Ray answered. "Good-by. You won't hear from me again."

He got up from the set and then smashed it—smashed it so thoroughly it would be necessary to send to Seattle for parts and tubes before it could be used. He made his way to Jeb Brainard's cabin, picked up his set and carried it down to the water and dumped it. He was taking no chance of anyone making one set out of two smashed ones.

The cannery tender offered a real problem. Turner lurked in the shadows of the wharf for several minutes, then boarded the craft and made his way to the radio shack, which was located on the boat deck. He dropped the set into the water, then went back to his office, entering it through the back door.

He stretched out in his chair, a picture of utter defeat. "I'm through as a hardrock miner," he told himself. "Tim Bradford was right, and that's hard to take, even from a man who's dead. But dad will get out from under. He'll trick a lot of people into needing stock to cover commitments, then he'll play the generous role and sell. There'll be some mighty mad people in a few days; but, after all, self-protection is the first law of nature."

He heard men in the outer office and he wondered if they were coming to vent their anger on him. But why should they?—he asked. After all, anyone could make a mistake in judgment. Nevertheless, he opened a drawer and took out an automatic

pistol. It was loaded, and ready for business. He placed it in his lap and waited.

GUIDED by the sound of a frightened voice, Tim Bradford fought his way back until he stumbled over a groping figure. "Hurt?" he asked. He had to bellow the query to overcome the roar of the wind and water.

"Get me out of here!" a voice pleaded. "Strike a match."

"Sam Pelton!" Tim Bradford's disgust was evident in his voice. "Come on!" He yanked the man to his feet. "Jess Reagan used to say there was a reason for everything, but I'm damned if I can figure the reason I should come back for you," he growled. "Put your hand on my shoulder."

The others were perhaps three minutes ahead of Tim at the most, but under the circumstances three minutes was an eternity. He groped about for perhaps two minutes, then stopped. There was no chance of overtaking the others now. The water was too deep. They'd be drowned unless they could climb. Tim turned to the right, worked his way along a wall and turned into a cross-cut. The water was moving fast, proving it was spilling into a lower level.

There was more than an even chance the current might carry them to the brink and wash them into the level. Momentarily there was a waterfall ahead—Tim could hear it roaring. But there was no rush of air, proving air wasn't escaping beyond them. Tim carried a five-cell flashlight in his hand, but something had gone wrong with it.

He stopped on the brink of the falls, caught Pelton's arm and guided him toward a ladder. "Climb!" he ordered. "Hurry!"

Pelton climbed up to a narrow platform—the familiar combination of boards resting on iron rods fixed in the wall. There was room for several men and a drill, and Tim sprawled out on his stomach and relaxed. His heart was pounding violently from the long, sustained strain. His breathing was labored. Pelton lay gasping near by. The roar of falling water ended as the levels below filled and the water reached the level of the cross-cut.

"What're our chances of getting out?" Pelton asked at last.

"I don't know," Tim answered. "I haven't had time to figure that angle. I might've got confused in the excitement, but I think there's a stope above us. Of course the water will keep pouring in until every portion of the mine is filled to sea level. However, if there's no outlet here, the water can come only so high."

"Why can't it rise to sea level?"

"Because the air here will compress, and when it reaches the same pressure as the water it will keep the water from rising higher," Tim explained. "The important thing is, what will the pressure be and—can we stand it?"

TIM sat up, fumbled in his pockets and brought out a waterproof box of matches. He struck one, and looked around. He found, as he expected, a piece of candle sticking to a rock where the miners had worked. He lit the candle, and glanced at Sam Pelton. The man's face was ashen, and he was shaking with cold and fear.

"Hold the candle," Tim ordered. "I want to see if I can fix this flashlight."

The job required five minutes. It was merely a matter of repairing a loose connection damaged when he

had accidentally hit the flashlight against a rock. He turned the beam upward. The stope was narrow high up, but rather wide at their present level.

Turning the flashlight downward, Tim saw that the water was only ten feet below them. It boiled steadily as pressure forced it in. Tim saw something flat come to the surface and go down again. He waited for it to rise once more.

"What is it?" Pelton asked.

"Bottom fish," Tim answered. "Eyes have popped out because the pressure is less. It's pretty banged up, but I've got to get it."

"What for?"

"We've got to eat," Tim pointed out.

"I hadn't thought of that," Pelton muttered. He began climbing to a higher level. Tim waited until the water was almost level with the platform, then he sprawled on his stomach and turned on the light.

Débris from the ocean floor and mine came to the surface and disappeared. The fish came up and Tim pulled it to the platform. He pulled out several timbers and another fish before quitting. He turned the light upward.

"Look around for a piece of wire, or rope," he told his companion.

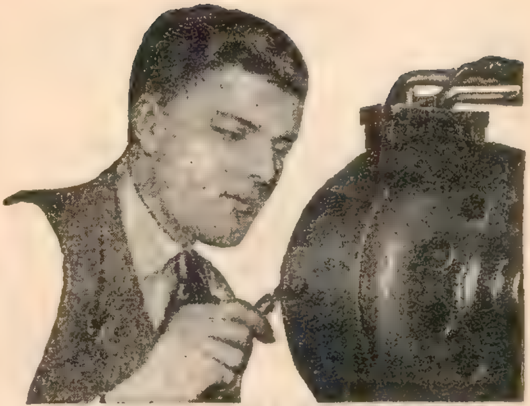
Pelton lowered a wire. Tim fastened the timbers to it, and ordered Pelton to draw it up. Next he sent up the fish, then he himself came up. The water was still rising.

"I feel queer," Pelton declared. "It's like my lungs are bein' pushed in."

"Pressure!" Tim answered. "You'd better pull yourself together, Pelton. Before this is over with we may have the life squeezed out of us. If you crack—well, it won't be pleasant. It might unnerve me and I might kill you for my own peace of mind!"

"You wouldn't!" Pelton gasped.

"I wouldn't if I were in my right



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mind," Tim agreed. "But if you went berserk, then I wouldn't be responsible."

He looked hard in Pelton's eyes and saw fear and desperation deepen in them. For a moment he saw the killer light blaze, then waver uncertainly. It reminded him of a wet match about to go out.

Minutes passed. There was no sound now, but the water kept climbing higher.

"Damn it," Pelton whimpered. "Keeps comin' and comin'. Ain't it ever goin' to stop? It's pushin' me in on all sides. It's—"

"Shut up!" Tim commanded. "I'm feeling the pressure, too. We're going to get to work before we go crazy." He lit a candle. "O. K., now; find some rocks, slabs you can work loose, and pile 'em on the platform. I'll go to work on the timbers I brought up."

He whittled shavings off, then worked splinters free until he had quite a pile. He examined the rising waters again, found several boards and more of the popeyed fish. He brought them out and split up the boards which hadn't been in the water long enough to soak through. He built a fire, stripped off his clothing and hung it up to dry. Then he ordered Pelton to dry out.

PELTON sat down and started to undress. Then abruptly he passed out. Only a quick grab by Tim prevented him from falling from the platform.

Tim tied Pelton to the platform with a wire, then began turning the drying clothing. Fire was precious. Every bit of heat must be used. He cleaned the fish and fried them on the hot rocks. When the slabs of fish were ready to eat, he looked at Pelton. The man was still out.

Tim ate some fish and felt stronger. He saw that the water appeared to have reached its level

at last. Tim turned the light on the apex of the stope. It was dense with smoke, but the air below was clear enough. His light followed the walls as he searched for seepage. Drinking water might develop into a problem later on.

The rays of the fshlight fell on a pipe stub attached to the wall. They had used pneumatic drills in this area years ago, and that pipe might offer possibilities. Armed with a candle, Tim climbed to within ten feet of the pipe.

There seemed to be no possible way to reach it. He went back down to the platform and removed the ladder that was half submerged in the water. He carried the ladder to the pipe and secured it with wire. It was dangerous business, and there was a sheer drop of seventy feet to the water if he slipped. He twisted on the valve, but couldn't budge it. He got a rock and pounded it at different angles, then tried again to move it. It yielded suddenly and began to whistle. Tim put his hand near the opening and felt it being sucked up. The air was going out, not coming in! If the line was open all the way to the compressor, then the air flow would continue until the pressure within the stope was equal to the normal atmosphere.

He opened the valve wider and the air fairly whistled through the pipe. "Good news!" he exclaimed. "Air's going all the way through."

When the pressure was lower Tim closed the valve. He might need every ounce of oxygen before the situation changed one way or the other. When he climbed to the platform he found Pelton sitting up. The man stared at him a long time.

"You hate my guts, don't you?" he said finally.

"Hate would be a compliment, Pelton," Tim told him. "It's something else, hard to describe. You can't hate a man who hasn't the guts to fight in the open. Who drops rocks—"

"You can't prove that," Pelton said desperately.

"A smart miner can prove who got careless with rocks if he wants to take the trouble. I'm surprised that you can't figure it out," Tim said. "In the present instance, I don't have to prove my point. The expression on your face gives you away."

"Can you always prove—" Pelton began, then stopped suddenly as he realized he was getting onto dangerous ground.

"Whenever murder's been done in a mine, it'll be proved sooner or later," Tim declared. "We haven't time to talk about that now, though. We'd better try to let the folks outside know we're alive. There's a bare chance Daylight Lee and the others can help us—if they survived. I don't expect much from the Turner outfit. Rats don't stay with a sinking ship. Which makes it tough on you, seeing you're a rat yourself."

"You tryin' to insult me?" Pelton demanded.

"That wouldn't be possible, Pelton," Tim answered. Climb up on the ladder and pound on that air pipe. Take this short piece of steel along. And don't drop it into the water or you'll have to pound with a rock. Remember, your life depends on it. When you're tired I'll relieve you."

CHAPTER XII

A MESSAGE

A CROWD of stunned men stood about the mine mouth staring at the tangled cable and the jammed cage. The air had long since ceased coming from the shaft. The ore

trains were still, but the stamps continued to roar. No shut-down order would come until the last ton of ore passed through the mills.

"Tim knew it was comin'," Raw Meat Riley said again and again. "He got all the boys out, and he'd got hisself out if he hadn't gone back. It was a sad day for Old Glory when he was voted out of the job."

"The Turners and Ann Sloan paid plenty for their mistake," said another. "But Tim paid for it with his life. If he's ever found we'll pack him up Mineral Mountain and lay him beside Jess Reagan."

"He won't ever be found," a third man argued. "How can you pump out a mine when the whole blasted ocean is pourin' into it? I never saw anything like the way that water come in."

A half hysterical woman ran among the group, looking for her husband and crying.

"He's safe," somebody told her. "You must've passed him on the way up."

"You're trying to fool me," she sobbed, "to keep the truth from me."

"But it's the truth," said Daylight. "Jim's above ground. Tim sent him up. Now you run along home and you'll find him there."

A little while later Tess Lee hurried up. When she saw Daylight she broke into happy tears. "I just heard the mine had flooded," she explained. "And when I heard your voice, Daylight, I . . . I—" Then she was sobbing on his shoulder.

"There, there, Tess!" he said. "Don't cry—" He couldn't go on.

Tess looked quickly into his face. "Daylight, what is it?" she cried. "Tim?"

Daylight swallowed hard and regained his composure with an effort. "Tess, you read the Bible a lot. Remember where it says, 'Greater love hath no man than this'—"

"Of course," she answered wonderingly.

"Well, just hold on to that, and hold on tight, Tess," Daylight urged. "Whenever you think of . . . of Tim."

"And . . . Sam?" she asked quietly.

"Like as not he's around somewheres," Daylight answered. "There is one man missin' and—"

"It's Sam," Tess Lee declared. "He must have gone back to save someone's life and was caught. I've always known Sam would come through."

The miners exchanged glances. They knew Sam wasn't a hero by any stretch of the imagination, but they would have lied from hell to breakfast for Mrs. Daylight Lee.

"Take me home, Daylight," Tess said wearily. "Unless you feel you should stay."

"I think I'll stay," said Daylight. "I want to set close to the air pipes just in case there's a tapping. He sat down near the compressor again and Tess left with two neighbor women.

"Somebody should send word Outside about this, I suppose," one of the miners said. "It means our stock is worthless. We start all over again."

"Yeah, I'd sell my five thousand dollars' worth for a song, and wouldn't kick if the singer was full of sour notes," another miner said. "I suppose Ray Turner's sent word out. Say, where is Turner, anyway?"

"He's down in his office tryin' to recover from the shock," Raw Meat Riley said. "It's the closest shave he ever had. Let's go down and find out what his plans are."

RILEY and two others made their way to the office and knocked on the door.

"Come in," Turner invited. His

eyes were narrowed, and his hand clutched the automatic pistol in his lap. Apparently this was no mob, ready to string him up to the nearest limb.

"What's to be done?" asked Riley.

"Gentlemen, I'm stunned," Ray Turner said. "I don't know which way to turn. It doesn't seem real."

"It's real enough," Raw Meat declared. "Two men are gone and, even if they're alive I don't see how we can get to 'em. I suppose you sent word Outside?"

"No," Turner answered. "I haven't. I've been right here in my chair, wondering what to do next. I suppose we could use one of the short-wave sets or charter a boat to carry word to the nearest government telegraph office."

He slipped the automatic pistol into an open drawer, then drew a pad toward him. He scribbled something and handed the sheet to Riley who read it aloud:

> "Waters of Deception Straits broke through and flooded the mine. Mine probably total loss. Mill undamaged. Will investigate possibilities of shipping in tonnage for mill. Please transmit orders immediately.
>
> "Ray Turner, Superintendent."

"Will one of you men take this to the nearest radio transmitter?" he requested. "And bring back any orders. If possible, I'd like to talk to my father."

Raw Meat picked up the message and left the office, followed by the others. Turner watched them go with a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. He was sure he had played his role of the stunned, bewildered superintendent well. They would never suspect that he was the person who had smashed the transmitters.

It wasn't a half hour before the men returned, their faces angry. "Every radio in camp's been smashed," Raw Meat declared

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grimly. "There's some kind of dirty work going on!"

"What?" Turner leaped to his feet. "Are you sure?"

"Yep. One set was swiped and two others smashed. I talked to Brainard and he says he'll have to send Outside for parts. Somebody's tryin' to cash in on this deal," Riley said furiously. "And if we find out who it is we'll take 'em apart."

"We've got to beat their game," Ray Turner declared firmly. "I'll charter the fastest speedboat in camp and you boys can take the message to the nearest government telegraph office. If you see a ship with a radio transmitter, hail it."

"The *Teal's* the fastest speedboat," Riley told him.

"Get ready, and I'll charter her," Ray Turner directed.

He left the office on the run and went down to the *Teal's* boathouse. She was a slim, sleek craft, decked over, and with a wheelhouse lifting cautiously above the deck. There was no one on her.

Turner dipped up a bucket of salt water and emptied it into the port fuel tank, then he shut off the port feed valve and turned on the starboard. The *Teal* should be well at sea before they began drawing on the port tank.

Turner went to the second story of the boathouse and aroused the owner. "Get up," he ordered, "got a charter for you. Didn't you know the Old Glory flooded an hour ago?"

The man was stunned, then philosophical. "That's the end of this gold camp. The port of Mineral Mountain will be another dead city."

He hurried down and warmed up the motor. Raw Meat Riley appeared a few moments later. The *Teal* backed out of the boathouse, turned in the channel, then shot away.

RAY TURNER walked back to the office slowly. Again he felt that he had played his part well. His prompt action in chartering the fastest boat in camp, and giving instructions to hail a passing steamer, should go far toward clearing him of possible suspicion. Of course the *Teal* might encounter a vessel large enough to carry a radio transmission set. A stray Coast Guarder might pass along, or one of the larger fishing boats might cut through Deception Straits on her way to port. But Turner felt fairly confident the speedboat would proceed a considerble distance, then have gasoline trouble.

Her owner, if he was lucky, might drift into a safe bay, but there was a fair chance he would pile up on a reef. If he and Raw Meat Riley escaped with their lives, it would be several days at least before they were rescued. In the meantime, Turner reasoned, his father would get out from under. There was another angle, too, that he hadn't missed. He had gotten rid of Raw Meat Riley, whom the other miners looked to as a leader.

With Tim Bradford below ground, the Old Glory miners lacked natural leadership. The men were beginning to drift back to their homes, where they would realize they were not only out of a job, but must move to a new locality. Only the mill men had even a remote chance of working, and this depended on shipping in ore of sufficient value to pay charter fees, a discouraging prospect at best.

The office was empty, but Ray Turner remained there. No one came in, and shortly after midnight he went to bed. The stamps continued to roar, but there was mockery in their thunder now. The sullen tones of blasting that used to come at regu-

lar intervals from the mine were no longer heard.

In the morning Turner tuned in his radio. He listened to a news broadcast, then a stock market commentator. No mention was made by either of Old Glory's flooding.

Satisfied, Turner got dressed and left his quarters. Early as it was, men had already gathered to discuss the future. Their faces were grave and worried. They nodded briefly and resumed their conversation as soon as Turner was past. No one extended sympathy, and he couldn't help but realize how different their attitude would have been if Jess Reagan or Tim Bradford had been in charge.

He encountered a group of four women on the walk near the superintendent's office. They looked frightened and seemed to find comfort in each other's companionship.

"We expected to be here until we died," one said hopelessly. "I remember Jess Reagan once said the mine would be producing for the next fifty years or more. He said we might as well take root. Well, we took root and the roots went deep. My husband didn't sleep a wink all night, and he's a hard man."

"Nor mine," a second said. She looked up quickly at the sound of Turner's footstep. "Oh, good morning, Mr. Turner. It's too bad about the mine."

"I feel terribly sorry for all of you people," he told them. "We'll try to keep the mill running."

"But isn't there any way of pumping out the mine—"

"I'm afraid not," he said, and walked on.

The women looked up at Mineral Mountain, where the sunlight flooded Jess Reagan's tomb. "Won-

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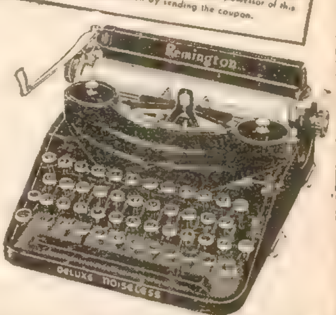

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DEPT. 165-R **CHICAGO**

der if Jess is restin' easy in his grave this mornin'!" one of them murmured.

"He would if Tim Bradford was alive," another woman answered. She smiled softly. "Maybe them two are together this mornin' figgerin' a low-grade proposition that'll produce more gold for street pavin' in Paradise."

MEANWHILE a blind man still waited in the compressor room, listening intently for any sign of life from within the mine. Tess Lee had just climbed the stairs, carrying a tray of food for her husband.

The air compressors that supplied fresh air to the mine were down.

The room was quiet, except for the roar of the air compressors that supplied the stamps.

"Sh-h-h!" Daylight warned, as Tess entered. "Not so loud."

Tess had been tiptoeing; now she stopped.

"Five minutes ago," Daylight explained, "I thought I heard somethin' go like this: 'Tap! Tap-tap-tap! Tap-tap!'"

"Oh, Daylight, you don't suppose—"

"There, I think I heard it again," Daylight said. He listened a moment, then beat the pipe with a piece of drill steel. "Telephone the mill and tell 'em to shut down the stamps," he said.

Tess obeyed. A few minutes later the camp experienced an unusual silence. Daylight pounded on the air pipe again, then listened.

"Tess, did you hear that?" he asked excitedly.

"No," she answered, "I didn't." He repeated the tap he thought he heard, waited a moment, then was answered. He did it twice more and each time received an answer.

"Tess," he said, "go tell Ray Turner somebody's alive in the mine." Then Daylight made a signal which

Tim and he had agreed on several years ago in case of disaster. It was a request for the number of men trapped. Immediately the answer was returned in the form of two taps. "They're both alive," he said. "Buried alive. Wonder where they are? This pipe goes straight to number seven stope, but there're branches that carried air into other workings, so I can't tell from which spot the signals come."

Stopping the mill had brought Ray Turner to the plant immediately, and it was there that Tess Lee saw him. "Daylight asked them to shut down, so he could listen for tappings," she explained. "He heard 'em! Somebody's alive!"

"But what can we do about it?" Turner asked. He was thinking that trapped men can so often be reached because rescuers can work from adjoining tunnels, drifts or cross-cuts. Here, the sea had stopped all progress below ground.

Pete Hogan, a shift boss, joined them. "Did I hear you say Daylight had heard taps?" he asked Tess.

"Yes," she answered. "He did."

The trio hurried to the compressor room. "Both of 'em are alive," Daylight announced. "No need of you boys tryin' to hear the tappin' because your ears aren't up to it. Mine are extra good because I'm blind." He explained in detail the signal and answers.

"How we goin' to find out where they are?" Hogan inquired. "If we could learn that, then we'd know what could be done."

Other miners had gathered now. "Got any ideas, Daylight?" one of them inquired.

"Turn air into the pipe line," Daylight ordered, "and see if all valves are closed."

"What would that prove?" asked Turner.

"It mightn't prove a damned thing," Daylight said. "But here's the way it looks to me. Wherever they was trapped, the air pressure would be plenty high. Naturally, Tim would open a valve to try to relieve it."

"And the valve might still be open!" said Hogan. He cut in the line, closed a valve on it that would permit the air to escape, then turned the full pressure into the pipe. He watched the gauge carefully. "It's going somewhere."

"It's goin' into their place," Daylight said. "Here's why: All feeder air pipes leading off from that main line were closed tight. That was the rule, and if a miner forgot and left the valve open the gauges would show it, and someone would go there and close that valve. Tim opened a valve to relieve the pressure and now the air's reachin' him."

"But we still don't know where he is?" Turner argued.

"You fellows go 'way," Daylight said, "and get ready for rescue work. I'll try and think of a way out of this." The air was closed at the pressure tank and after a while everyone but Tess left. She said nothing, but just sat there patiently, as she so often did when Daylight struggled with a problem.

"I've got an idea," Daylight said at last, and a certain hopeful quality in his voice sent a thrill through his wife.

CHAPTER XIII

PIPE-LINE COMMUNICATION

"IT should be low tide about now," Daylight explained. "Now, the valve that supplies air to the pipe line from the compressor is closed. Tess, you open that valve on the line, and we'll see what happens."

She opened it, but nothing happened. Daylight waited patiently

and presently he smiled. "Hear that? Air escaping. The tide's rising. The water will rise inside as well as outside the mine. So as the water lifts in Tim's place, it will compress the air which will be forced out. You stay here and watch. I've got to have some sleep. When the tide goes out again, the air should go into the pipe. Tell me if that happens."

When Daylight returned he learned that he was married to a resourceful woman.

"I closed the valve as soon as you left," Tess told him. "When the tide had been running out about an hour, I opened the valve and you should have heard the air suck through it. There's no doubt of it, the line runs all the way to some crosscut. The question is, can we determine whether it's Tim's or some other spot. Daylight, have you worked that out, too?"

Her confidence in him was absolute. He had so many hours to just sit and think that he was continually surprising her with some plan. "I believe so, Tess," he said. "We'll just leave things as they are until high tide. In the meantime, you get me some tissue paper, a pencil and a pair of shears."

While they were waiting for the tide to come in, Hogan joined them. He reported that everyone was ready to begin rescue work as soon as the location of the trapped men was determined.

"Hogan," Daylight directed, "disconnect the air pipe at the compressed air tank. We'll close the valve Tess has been listenin' at, too. I'll want everything tight later on. Now, Tess, you take the shears and cut pieces of paper about three inches square."

When this was done, she took a pencil and wrote as Daylight dictated. Each square of paper was numbered. When Daylight had finished, Tess took the pieces of paper and wadded each into a tight ball. Hogan took the balls and poured them into the air pipe, then he connected the pipe with the compressor. "Now we'll wait until the tide goes out," Daylight announced. "Then we'll see what happens."

COULD Daylight have looked into the stope he would have seen Tim Bradford sleeping soundly, while Sam Pelton crouched in the darkness and endured the tortures of the damned. He was going to die, he told himself repeatedly, and he was afraid—afraid of the hour of reckoning.

The stope was pitch dark. Pelton had wanted to light a candle, but Tim Bradford wouldn't stand for it. Light gave comfort to a man, and drove off some of the fears preying on him. But Tim was jealously guarding the pieces of candle the miners had left, as well as his own flashlight.

Tim continued to sleep, and finally Pelton also dozed. He awakened with a start, feeling faint. He shook Tim. "I'm goin' to pass out," he gasped. "Air must be poisoned, or somethin'."

"Huh? How's that?" Tim's voice sounded as if he had been drugged. He aroused himself with an effort. Breathing was difficult. He turned on the flashlight and looked around. The water was down. "Tide's out," he said. He realized that he was breathing rapidly, as men do when climbing high mountains where the air is rare. He shook his head to clear away the fog, without much success. Suddenly he turned the light on the valve.

"I must've closed the damned thing when the tide was high," he

said. "When the water went out it reduced the atmospheric pressure."

He climbed slowly up the ladder to the valve. Things were swimming before his eyes and twice he almost fell. He looked at the valve. It was wide open. He climbed down.

"Some fool on the other end of the line closed the valve," he muttered. "Naturally the air didn't come into us when the tide went out. Damn them, don't they realize I counted on getting a little fresh air by the movement back and forth through the pipe?"

"Maybe they don't know we're alive," said Pelton. "You haven't heard any answers to your poundin' lately."

"I know," Tim admitted. "But someone got our signals. Daylight, most likely."

Tim leaned back against the wall, exhausted. A few minutes later he heard air roar from the valve. He turned the light on the valve because he now realized there was purpose in reducing the pressure within the stope. Suddenly a flurry of white objects burst from the pipe and floated downward.

Tim stripped off his clothing. "Hold the light on the water, Pelton," he ordered. "I want to find out what that is. Daylight's up to something."

He climbed down the ladder to the level below and slipped into the water. Balls of paper floated on the surface, dozens of them. He picked them up and swam to the landing. Some of the balls were sodden, others dry. Tim climbed back up to the dry platform and dressed. He unfolded the first ball and noticed it contained the figure three. The second ball was number nine. There was writing on each.

"Help me open the balls and spread 'em out," he directed. "They are numbered."

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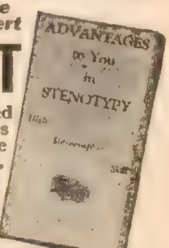

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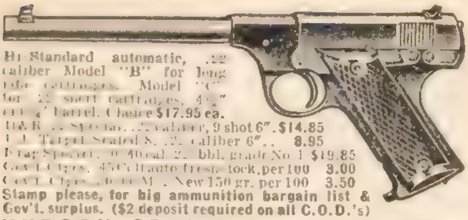

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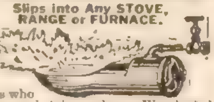

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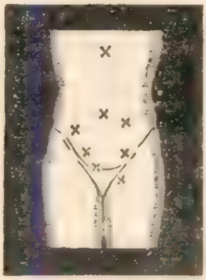

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It required nearly a half hour to complete the message. It had been duplicated in case some of the slips of paper were lost. The message read:

TIM:

Signals heard faintly. Pumping air into you. When pressure too heavy, close valve. We'll stop pumping and open valve this end. Signal your location by long blasts of air. When finished, leave valve open. We'll try another experiment low tide.

DAYLIGHT.

"They're goin' to help us," Pelton cried.

Tim nodded. "But don't let your hopes get too high. It'll take weeks, maybe months, to break through, and we may not last it out. You might as well know the brutal truth. We're in number seven stope and the roof is plenty thick."

AFTER a while Tim climbed up and closed the valve. The pressure was getting heavy again. He waited perhaps a quarter hour, then he climbed up and opened the valve. Air sucked through swiftly. He shut it off and waited a minute, then he opened the valve once more. He opened and closed it seven times. Then five minutes later he opened it again and let the pressure within the stope drop back to normal.

"There's nothing to do but wait until the tide goes out again," he said to Pelton. "Then we'll see what happens."

"Does it mean somebody has to go swimmin' every time they send us a message?" Pelton asked. "You shivered fifteen minutes after you'd picked up the last pieces of paper."

"And that was enough," Tim observed. "We're going to use the old head right now." He stared briefly at Pelton. "Take off your shirt. Your sweater will keep you warm enough."

Tim tied the cuffs of the shirt with wire, buttoned up the front, climbed to the valve and hung it around the

outlet. He wired it carefully so that a sudden blast of air wouldn't blow it into the water.

There was a long wait, during which they talked and dozed. Again they grew conscious of thinning air as the tide went out. Then suddenly they heard the blast of compressed air once more. The shirt bellied out until it looked as if a fat man had been poured into it. After about fifteen minutes' whipping about, it sagged again and the air flow stopped.

"It's like hanging your stocking up for Christmas," said Tim. "Think I'll go up and find out what Santa Claus has brought us."

He closed the valve and brought down the shirt, then emptied a heap of paper on the platform. There was a brief message which read:

TIM:
Signals received. Rescue work starts immediately. Will communicate daily. Signal one blast if you receive this.
DAYLIGHT.

Tim climbed up to the valve, opened and released all of the extra air in the stope. Then he went down and began opening the small bits of paper. There were several dozen roundish pieces of cheese and chocolate.

It looked as if they might receive enough food daily to keep them alive for some time to come.

CHAPTER XIV

MOB LAW

DAYLIGHT LEE waited near the open valve for several minutes after he had turned off the air from the pressure tanks. Presently the air whistled forth.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "They got my last message and the grub we sent. Of course, we can't send 'em beef steaks and spuds, but we can keep life in them."

Pete Hogan joined him and asked what luck he had had. "That's great," he said, when Daylight told him. "We've got maps of the mine, and an engineer is goin' to figger out the location of number seven stope and tell us where to start in at. The boys are packin' steel up now, and it won't be long until we're blastin' our way down."

He went back to the office to talk things over with Ray Turner. The latter was figuring the cost of rescue, and the sum staggered him. He shrugged his shoulders indifferently after he had thought things over. "After all, this comes out of the lads father sold our stock to," he mused. "Oh, hello, Hogan. What's the situation now."

"Daylight got food to them," Hogan answered. "Kehoe, the engineer, wants to bring in his figures. He wants to see if they check with yours."

"Tell him to bring 'em in anytime," Turner answered expansively. "And remember, don't count the cost. Anything to rescue those boys."

"That's mighty fine of you, Mr. Turner," Hogan said, "but nothin' more'n us hardrock men expect from the boss. It's kind o' nice to be offered things, instead of havin' to ask for 'em."

Twenty-four hours after Tim's position was known, Kehoe had concluded that the best way to reach the stope was to drill into the side of the mountain, instead of straight down. Digging down was the shortest method, but not the quickest. Too much time would be lost handling rock. A level tunnel would permit the use of wheelbarrows in disposing of rock. Moreover, men could work without the threat of rock falling on them.

Again, Ray Turner agreed with the suggestions offered and gave the necessary orders. Men who had broken records in Fourth of July drilling contests now bettered their former records. They drove themselves day after day, working short shifts so that a relatively fresh crew would be in the tunnel at all times.

Daily messages and food were sent through the air line to the imprisoned men. The food continued to be the kind that would move easily. They even stuffed a prepared breakfast food into the pipe and turned on the pressure.

"We're doin' our best," said Daylight, "but I know those boys are losin' weight. Every day their resistance gets less. There'll be a time when they can't feed theirselves. Then it won't be long."

Ten days after the mine flooded, the steamer *Kodiak* arrived from Seattle. The first man off the ship was Raw Meat Riley. Behind him was the owner of the speedboat *Teal*.

"What's bein' done about findin' the cuss who busted them radio transmitters?" Riley demanded. "Because the same committee can look into another matter."

"What other matter?" asked Ray Turner. "Did you send that message I gave you?"

"Did I send that message?" Riley's lips twisted into a sneer. "Don't be funny. Somebody put water in the gasoline. The motor quits on us fifty miles from nowhere. We drift and drift and finally pile up on a reef. There we stayed hungry and miserable for five days. Then a fishin' schooner picked us up."

"Then you didn't send my message?"

"Sure, as soon as we hit port," Riley answered. "No answer come. We took the *Kodiak* when it came along, and here we are. Your girl was aboard."

"Do you mean Miss Sloan is a passenger on the *Kodiak?*" Turner inquired. He was both worried and pleased, but the more he thought of it, the less his pleasure and the deeper his worry. He hurried down to the wharf.

ANN was just coming down the gangplank when Turner saw her. She seemed quiet and reserved, and she managed to evade Turner when he started to kiss her.

"What's the matter, Ann?" Turner asked. "Are you angry because I made an error in judgment?"

"We'll talk about it later," the girl said. "And understand this, Ray, I won't hold an error in judgment against you or anyone else. I made one myself when I voted against Tim Bradford as superintendent."

"Then it's all over between us? Our engagement is broken?" He put the query bluntly.

"I didn't say that, did I?" Before he could answer she added: "Don't be silly, Ray. I'm no fair-weather friend. We'll talk things over at the cottage." She looked weary. "I'm tired, but I'd like to see you this evening."

"I'll be there at seven o'clock," he answered. "I'm pretty busy myself. We're trying to rescue two of the boys."

"Were men caught? Your father didn't tell me," Ann said. "Who are they?"

"Tim Bradford and Sam Pelton," Turner said. "We'll get 'em out. Don't worry." There were several questions he wished to ask her, but he decided that now wasn't the time.

Time dragged for Turner that afternoon and he kept close watch on the girl's cottage. He wanted to know if she sent for anyone else

ahead of him. People like Daylight and Tess Lee, for example. He felt very much on the defensive. Sure enough, at about six o'clock he saw Daylight Lee hurry toward Ann's cottage.

When the blind man entered, Ann came forward and shook hands.

"This is a surprise, Miss Sloan," Daylight said.

"I wish you'd call me Ann," she told him. "I'd like to be as close to the mine people as my father was."

"It's up to you, Ann," said Daylight. "And it shouldn't be hard. I come as soon as you sent for me."

"Tell me what's been happening," she urged.

Daylight told her everything and she listened mostly without interruption. Only here and there did she ask that a point be cleared up.

"Of course, the mine is through," she said when he had finished, "but I'm here to buy your stock at the price you paid for it."

"Does that go for the others, too?" Daylight inquired.

"Yes," she answered. "Every Old Glory man who owns stock will be paid in full the amount he invested."

"How can you do it?"

"Because my stock was quietly unloaded on the market," the girl explained. "Kirk Turner received word from some source right after the disaster. He unloaded his holdings and mine, but left you people holding the sack. It is a double cross, Daylight, and a big one."

"Then what happened?"

"The new crop of victims, mostly pretty smart men, got wind of the disaster and quietly unloaded on the little fellows." The girl looked sober. "And now hundreds of small-income people are holding the stock."

"And the little fellows paid a big price?"

"No. Kirk Turner's victims took a big loss, because they had to work fast and get rid of the stuff before

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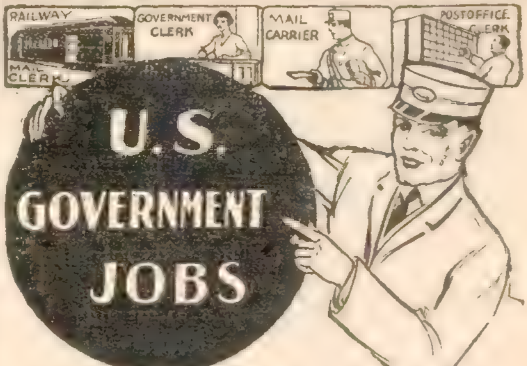

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its utter worthlessness was common knowledge," she explained. "You said you could communicate with Tim. Will you send him a message from me?"

"Sure," Daylight answered, and told her how to go about putting it into shape to send.

Ann spent some time on the note, then gave the pieces of numbered tissue paper to Daylight. He tucked them into his vest pocket.

"We'll send it next time the tide's low," he promised. "And now I'll have to be going. What's that?" He jumped up. "Sounds like somebody jeering."

HE ran to the porch and listened. Ray Turner was coming down the walk. Daylight recognized the man's step. Here and there women were jeering at him, and he was answering them with nervous protests.

As Ann came to the door, the women directed their attack on her. Daylight heard his own wife remonstrating with them.

"Hold on, you girls!" Daylight yelled. "Ann's all right. You go home and calm down."

"She's pulled the wool over your eyes with her pretty face and tricky smile," a woman accused.

"How can a tricky smile and pretty face influence me?" Daylight asked quietly. "Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?"

"I'm sorry, Daylight," Tess said quickly. "We're all stirred up by something we've learned. Come on girls, let's go home. Daylight's never failed me yet, and he's pretty old to begin now. One thing about bein' blind, you can't see the hate an' trickery and all the rest in folks' faces. That gives you a chance to use your own horse sense."

The women walked away and Ann turned to Daylight. "Thanks, Daylight," she said gratefully. "And see that my message reaches Tim

Bradford as soon as possible." She looked at Turner. "Come in, Ray," she invited.

Turner entered the room and sat down in the chair Daylight had just left. He was nervous. "Fools," he snapped, "going off half-cocked. Sure, I made a mistake when I robbed the pillars, and I admitted it. I'm sparing no expense to get those men out of there—"

"*You* are sparing no expense?" Ann broke in. "You say that, when the Turners don't own a share in the mine. There are some nasty rumore going about."

"But how could father unload?" Turner demanded, thinking fast and playing out his role. "How'd he know?"

"We're coming to that," the girl said. "Someone sent him word, and he acted. It was someone here in Mineral Mountain." Her eyes were troubled and grave. "Ray, did you notify him?"

"And then send Raw Meat Riley out on the fastest speedboat? Don't be silly, Ann!"

"Wait! I know that. But the boat was wrecked. Did you send your father word immediately after the disaster?" she asked again. "I want a definite answer."

"No!" he snapped. "Now, are you satisfied?"

"Of course," she answered. "Now, you'd better get back to the job. I want to talk to some other people."

When he was outside Ray Turner began to wonder whether Ann was convinced. "She was so blasted calm," he fumed. "So sure of herself. Like her old man. He used to treat father that way when they didn't agree. Well, dammit, she's not going to push me around. The little fool should be tickled to death to know she got in the clear. We saved her nearly a million dollars."

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He walked toward the compressor room and looked in. Daylight and Hogan were at work. The latter was disconnecting the air pipe and pouring wads of paper into it, while Daylight was oiling the compressor. He wasn't needed here, and went back to the office. "What have those damned women found out?" he asked himself. He opened a window and listened. Everything was quiet. "Too damned quiet for comfort," he muttered.

IN the darkness of the stope, Tim Bradford heard the air coming. He turned on the light and watched the shirt flap under the blast. He removed it and shook the contents onto the platform. There were several food items, but he knew by the lightness there was a note also. He gathered the balls together, unfolded and spread them out. He was surprised to see that the note was from Ann Sloan.

DEAR TIM:
I came north to acknowledge a mistake and I find you trapped. I'll stop at nothing to right the wrong done the little fellows. I am buying back the stock from them at the price they paid.
Sincerely,
ANN SLOAN.

Tim read the note several times. "They don't come any better than that girl," he told himself.

"What's the news?" Pelton asked.

"They're going to get us out of here," Tim answered, evading the query. He was reading the story behind the girl's words. It looked very much as if Kirk Turner had received advance knowledge of the disaster and had unloaded his stock and Ann's. And Ann, naturally, wouldn't stand for it.

Tim arranged several fragments, numbered them, and wrote on the clear side of several the same message:

DAYLIGHT:
Hang onto your stock. If I live, think I can beat the sea.
TIM.

What followed was pure experiment—an attempt to send a message back to Daylight Lee. Tim knew Daylight always left a valve open so the stope pressure could be eased after a transmission of notes or food. He watched the tide come in and allowed the pressure to build up to a point almost beyond endurance, then he stuffed the balls of paper into the outlet. He opened the valve and the air flowed through the pipe with a deep, whistling sound.

There was no compressor behind to force objects through the pipe, but there was the volume contained in the stope. He waited until the last of the air had gone through, then he came down.

"When somebody comes with more grub and notes," Tim reflected, "they'll find the balls of paper scattered around. I hope they don't blow away. And I hope whoever finds them has sense enough to pick 'em up."

TIM'S balls of paper lay on the compressor-room floor, unnoticed. Daylight, passing through, naturally didn't see them, and Hogan had gone to get some sleep. Early the following morning, Ray Turner had occasion to go into the room.

He saw the balls of paper near the open valve, stooped and picked them up. "Some that didn't get through," he observed, "and were blown back. Well, let's see what the boys are saying to Bradford."

He read part of Ann's note to Tim before he realized that a message was written on the other side. He took the papers to the office and spread the pieces on his disk. He whistled softly as he read the note to Daylight. Tim's statement that he thought he could beat the sea was startling, fantastic. He had little time to ponder over it, however, for outside his office he heard a quick step, then a confusion of voices.

Turner dropped the balls of paper into an ash tray and touched a match to them. They blazed brightly for a moment, then died down, changing from a sullen red to black.

His eyes on the tiny blaze, Turner opened a drawer and pulled out a loaded automatic pistol. He had a second one in a shoulder holster. He drew it and stared at the door. Suddenly it fairly exploded as a heavy

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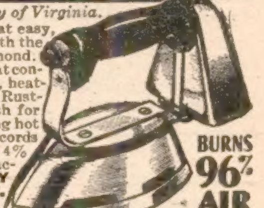

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shoulder struck it. Raw Meat Riley stood there, glaring.

Turner saw that he was facing a dangerous moment. He raised one gun so it could be seen by a dozen men flanking Riley. "Back, or I'll let you have it!" he threatened.

"Get him!" A voice from behind made the demand and a score of others took it up.

"We got the goods on you, Turner," Riley shouted. "It was you that tipped off your old man. You done it by short-wave radio, then you smashed the sets. An' you damned near sent me an' another man to a watery grave—"

"Wait!" Turner roared. Stark fear lashed him to desperation. "I'll talk! The Turners will buy every share of stock you boys hold at the price you paid for it."

"He's bluffin'!" Riley bellowed. "The history of the Turners is one double cross after another."

"Bring him out and hang him!" the crowd demanded.

"Sure, that's what we're goin' to do, Turner," Riley shouted. A miner looking through a side window realized what was up. He picked up a six-foot drill and smashed against the window. As Turner whirled and fired, Raw Meat Riley grabbed a chair and hurled it at Turner. Guns roared briefly as the man staggered backward. Then he went down, the desk half across his body. Raw Meat Riley leaped under one spitting weapon and twisted Turner's arm back.

"We've got him!" he roared. "Bring the rope!"

What action are the infuriated miners going to take against Ray Turner? Will the rescue squad reach the entombed men in time? Even if he gets out of the Old Glory alive, how does Tim Bradford expect to "beat" the sea? Another installment of this gripping serial appears in next week's issue.

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